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DISCARD

MODERN ENGLISH WRITERS

ROBERT BROWNING

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BY

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TO THE

REV. F. E. MILLSON.

DEAR OLD FRIEND,

A generation has passed since the day when, in your study at Brackenbed Grange, your reading of "Ben Ezra," the tones of which still vibrate in my memory, first introduced me to the poetry of Robert Browning. He was then just entering upon his wider fame. You had for years been one not merely of the few who recognised him, but of those, yet fewer, who proclaimed him. The standpoint of the following pages is not, I think, very remote from your own; conversations with you have, in any case, done something to define it. You see, then, that your share of responsibility for them is, on all counts, considerable, and you must not refuse to allow me to associate them with a name which the old Rabbi's great heartening cry: "Strive, and hold cheap the strain, Learn, nor account the pang, Dare, never grudge the throe," summons spontaneously to many other lips than mine. To some it is brought yet closer by his calm retrospect through sorrow.

εἰ δὴ θεῖον ὁ νοῦς πρὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ ὁ κατὰ τοῦτον βίος θεῖος πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον.—ARIST., *Eth. N.* x. 8.

"Nè creator nè creatura mai,"
Cominciò ei, "figliuol, fu senza amore."
—DANTE, *Purg.* xvii. 91.

PREFACE.

BROWNING is confessedly a difficult poet, and his difficulty is by no means all of the kind which opposes unmistakable impediments to the reader's path. Some of it is of the more insidious kind, which may co-exist with a delightful persuasion that the way is absolutely clear, and Browning's "obscurity" an invention of the invertebrate. The problems presented by his writing are merely tough, and will always yield to intelligent and patient scrutiny. But the problems presented by his mind are elusive, and it would be hard to resist the cogency of his interpreters, if it were not for their number. The rapid succession of acute and notable studies of Browning put forth during the last three or four years makes it even more apparent than it was before that the last word on Browning has not yet been said, even in that very qualified sense in which the last word about any poet, or any poetry, can ever be said at all. The present volume, in any case, does not aspire to say it. But it is not perhaps necessary to apologise for adding, under these conditions, another to the list. From most of the recent studies I have learned something; but this book has its roots in a somewhat earlier time, and may perhaps be described as an attempt to work out, in the detail of Browning's life and poetry, from a more definitely literary standpoint and without Hegelian prepossessions, a view of his genius not unlike that set forth with so much eloquence and penetration, in his well-known volume, by Professor Henry Jones. The narrative of Browning's life, in the earlier chapters, makes no pretence to biographical completeness. An immense mass of detail and anecdote bearing upon him is now available and within easy reach. I have attempted to sift out from this picturesque loose drift the really salient and relevant material. Much domestic incident, over which the brush would fain linger, will be missed; on the other hand, the great central epoch of Browning's poetic life, from 1846 to 1869, has been treated, deliberately, on what may appear an inordinately generous scale. Some amount of overlapping and repetition, it may be added, in the analytical chapters the plan of the book rendered it impossible wholly to avoid.

I am indebted to a friend, who wishes to be nameless, for reading the proofs, with results extremely beneficial to the book.

University of Manchester,
January 1905.

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PART I.

BROWNING'S LIFE AND WORK

BROWNING.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE. *PARACELSUS.*

The Boy sprang up . . . and ran,
Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought.
—*A Death in the Desert.*

Dass ich erkenne, was die Welt
Im Innersten zusammenhält.
—*Faust.*

JUDGED by his cosmopolitan sympathies and his encyclopædic knowledge, by the scenery and the persons among whom his poetry habitually moves, Browning was one of the least insular of English poets. But he was also, of them all, one of the most obviously and unmistakably English. Tennyson, the poetic mouthpiece of a rather specific and exclusive Anglo-Saxondom, belonged by his Vergilian instincts of style to that main current of European poetry which finds response and recognition among cultivated persons of all nationalities; and he enjoyed a European distinction not attained by any other English poet since Byron. Browning, on the contrary, with his long and brilliant gallery of European creations, Browning, who claimed Italy as his "university," remains, as a poet, all but unknown even in Italy, and all but non-existent for the rest of the civilised world beyond the Channel. His cosmopolitan sympathies worked through the medium of a singularly individual intellect; and the detaching and isolating effect which pronounced individuality of thinking usually produces, even in a genial temperament, was heightened in his case by a robust indifference to conventions of all kinds, and not least to those which make genius easily intelligible to the plain man.

What is known of Browning's descent makes these contrasts in some degree intelligible. An old strain of Wessex squires or yeomen, dimly discernible in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, issued, about the middle of the eighteenth, in the first distinct personality among the poet's forebears, his grandfather, who also bore the name Robert. He was a robust, hard-headed, energetic, pushing man of business and the world, who made his way from a clerkship to an important and responsible post in the Bank of England, and settled accounts with religion and with literature in a right English way, by reading the Bible and 'Tom Jones' through every year, and very little else. More problematical and elusive is the figure of his first wife, Margaret Tittle, with whom, to judge from the character of her eldest son, literary and artistic sensibility first mingled in the hard practical Browning stock. In this second Robert Browning, indeed, the somewhat brutal and grasping egotism of the father gave place to a cultured humanity of almost feminine tenderness and charm. All his life long he was passionately devoted to literature, to art, to children. He collected rare books and prints with avidity, but was no less generous in giving them away. Indifferent to money, he hated to see a scrap of paper wasted. He had a neat touch in epigrams, and a boyish delight in grotesque rhymes. But there was no lack of grit in this accomplished, fresh-minded, and lovable man. He had the tough fibre of his race; only it was the wrongs of others that called out its tenacity, not his own. While holding an appointment on his mother's West Indian estate, he braved the fierce resentment of the whole colony by teaching a negro-boy to read; and finally incurred disinheritance rather than draw a livelihood from slave-labour. This Shelleyan act involved for him the resignation of his intellectual and artistic ambitions; and with the docility characteristic of him, where only his own interests were concerned, he forthwith entered the fairly well-paid but unexciting service of the Bank.

In 1811 he married, and on May 7 of the following year his eldest son, Robert, was born. His wife was the daughter of a German shipowner, William Wiedemann, who had settled and married at Dundee. Wiedemann is said to have been an accomplished draughtsman and musician, and his daughter, without herself sharing these gifts, probably passed them on to her son. Whether she also communicated from her Scottish and German ancestry the "metaphysical" proclivities currently ascribed to him, is a hypothesis absolutely in the air.[1] What is clear is that she was herself intellectually simple and of few ideas, but rich in the temperament, at once nervous and spiritual, which when present in the mother so often becomes genius in the son. "She was a divine woman," such was her son's brief sufficing tribute. Physically he seems to have closely resembled her,[2] and thev were bound together by a peculiarly passionate love from first to last.

The home in Camberwell into which the boy Robert was born reflected the serene, harmonious, self-contented character of his parents. Friends rarely disturbed the even tenor of its ways, and the storms of politics seem to have intruded as faintly into this suburban seclusion as the roar of London. Books, business, and religion provided a framework of decorous routine within which these kindly and beautiful souls moved with entire content. Well-to-do Camberwell perhaps contained few homes so pure and refined; but it must have held many in which the life-blood of political and social interests throbbed more vigorously, and where thought and conversation were in closer touch with the intellectual life of the capital and the larger movements of the time. Nothing in Browning's boyhood tended to open his imagination to the sense of citizenship and nationality which the imperial pageants and ceremonies of Frankfurt so early kindled in the child Goethe. But within the limits imposed by this quiet home young Robert soon began to display a vigour and enterprise which tried all its resources. "He clamoured for occupation from the moment he could speak," and "something to do" meant above all some living thing to be caught for him to play with. The gift of an animal was found a valuable aid to negotiations with the young despot; when medicine was to be taken, he would name "a speckled frog" as the price of his compliance, and presently his mother would be seen hovering hither and thither among the strawberry-beds. A quaint menagerie was gradually assembled: owls and monkeys, magpies and hedgehogs, an eagle and snakes. Boy-collectors are often cruel; but Robert showed from the first an anxious tenderness and an eager care for life: we hear of a hurt cat brought home to be nursed, of ladybirds picked up in the depths of winter and preserved with wondering delight at their survival. Even in stories the death of animals moved him to bitter tears. He was equally quick at books, and soon outdistanced his companions at the elementary schools which he attended up to his fourteenth year. Near at hand, too, was the Dulwich Gallery,—"a green half-hour's walk across the fields,"—a beloved haunt of his childhood, to which he never ceased to be grateful.[1] But his father's overflowing library and portfolios played the chief part in his early development. He read voraciously, and apparently without restraint or control. The letters of Junius and of Horace Walpole were familiar to him "in boyhood," we are assured with provoking indefiniteness by Mrs Orr; as well as "all the works of Voltaire." Most to his mind, however, was the rich sinewy English and athletic fancy of the seventeenth-century Fantastic Quarles; a preference which foreshadowed his later delight in the great master of the Fantastic school, and of all who care for close-knit intellect in poetry, John Donne.

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[1] A similar but more groundless suggestion, that the author of *Holy-cross Day* and *Rabbi ben Ezra* probably had Jewish blood in his veins, can only be described as an impertinence—not to Browning but to the Jewish race. As if to feel the spiritual genius of Hebraism and to be moved by the pathos of Hebraic fate were an eccentricity only to be accounted for by the bias of kin! It is significant that his demonstrable share of German blood left him rather conspicuously impervious to the literary — and more especially to the "metaphysical"—products of the German mind.

[2] Browning himself reports the exclamation of the family doctor when trying to diagnose an attack of his: "Why, has anybody to search far for a cause of whatever nervous disorder you may suffer from, when there sits your mother—whom you so absolutely resemble!" (*Letters to E. B. B.*, ii. 456.)

Curiously enough, it was some fragments of the grandiose but shadowy Ossian which first stirred the imitative impulse in this poet of trenchant and clear-cut form. "The first composition I ever was guilty of," he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett (Aug. 25, 1846), "was something in imitation of Ossian, whom I had not read, but conceived through two or three scraps in other books." And long afterwards Ossian was "the first book I ever bought in my life" (ib.) These "imitations" were apparently in verse, and in rhyme; and Browning's bent and faculty for both was very early pronounced. "I never can recollect not writing rhymes; . . . but I knew they were nonsense even then." And a well-known anecdote of his infancy describes his exhibition of a lively sense of metre in verses which he recited with emphatic accompaniments upon the edge of the dining-room table before he was tall enough to look over it. The crowding thoughts of his maturity had not yet supervened to prevent the abundant music that he "had in him" from "getting out." It is not surprising that a boy of these proclivities was captivated by the stormy swing and sweep of Byron; nor that he should have caught also something of his "splendour of language," and even, a little later, a reflection, respectable and suburban enough, of his rebellious Titanism. The less so, that in Robert's eleventh or twelfth year Byron, the head of the Satanic school, had become the heroic champion of Greek liberation, and was probably spoken of with honour in the home of the large-hearted banker who had in his day suffered so much for the sake of the unemancipated slave. In later years Browning was accustomed to deliver himself of breezy sarcasms at the expense of the

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[1] *To E. B. B.*, March 3, 1846.

"flat-fish" who declaimed so eloquently about the "deep and dark blue ocean." But it is easy to see that this genial chaff covered a real admiration,—the tribute of one abounding nature to another, which even years and the philosophic mind did not seriously abate. "I always retained my first feeling for Byron in many respects," he wrote in a significant letter to Miss Barrett in 1846. ". . . I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves, I am sure,—while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were condensed into the little china bottle yonder."[1] It was thus no mere freak of juvenile taste that took shape in these early Byronic poems. He entitled them, with the lofty modesty of boyish authorship, *Incondita*, and his parents sought to publish them. No publisher could be found; but they won the attention of a notable critic, W. J. Fox, who feared too much splendour and too little thought in the young poet, but kept his eye on him nevertheless.

Two years later the boy of fourteen caught the accents of another poetic voice, destined to touch the sources of music and passion in him with far more intimate power. His casual discovery, on a bookstall, of "Mr Shelley's Atheistical poem" seems to have for the first time made known to him even the name of the poet who had died in Italy four years before. Something of Shelley's story seems to have been known to his parents. It gives us a measure of the indulgent sympathy and religious tolerance which prevailed in this Evangelical home, that the parents should have unhesitatingly supplied the boy of fourteen, at some cost of time and trouble, with all the accessible writings of the "atheistical" poet, and with those of his presumably like-minded friend Keats as well. He fell instantly under the spell of both. Whatever he may have known before of ancient or modern literature, the full splendour of romantic poetry here broke upon him for the first time. Immature as he was, he already responded instinctively to the call of the spirits most intimately akin to his own. Byron's stormy power thrilled and delighted him; but it was too poor in spiritual elements, too negative, self-centred, and destructive to stir the deeper sources of Browning's poetry. In Keats and in Shelley he found poetic energies not less glowing and intense, bent upon making palpable to eye and ear visions of beauty which, with less of superficial realism, were fed by far more exquisite and penetrating senses, and attached by more and subtler filaments to the truth of things. Beyond question this was the decisive literary experience of Browning's early years. Probably it had a chief part in making the poet's career his fixed ideal, and ultimately, with his father's willing consent, his definite choice. What we know of his inner and outer life during the important years which turned the boy into the man is slight and baffling enough. The fiery spirit of poetry can rarely have worked out its way with so little disturbance to the frame. Minute scrutiny has disclosed traits of unrest and revolt; he professed "atheism" and practised vegetarianism, betrayed at times the aggressive arrogance of an able youth, and gave his devoted and tender parents moments of very superfluous concern. For with all his immensely vivacious play of brain, there was something in his mental and moral nature from first to last stubbornly inelastic and unimpressible, that made him equally secure against expansion and collapse. The same simple tenacity of nature which kept his buoyantly adventurous intellect permanently within the tether of a few primary convictions, kept him, in the region of practice and morality, within the bounds of a rather nice and fastidious decorum. Malign influences effected no lodgment in a nature so fundamentally sound; they might cloud and trouble imagination for a while, but their scope hardly extended further, and as they were literary in origin, so they were mainly literary in expression. In the meantime he was laying, in an unsystematic but not ineffective way, the foundations of his many-sided culture and accomplishment. We hear much of private tutors, of instruction in French, in music, in riding, fencing, boxing, dancing; of casual attendance also at the Greek classes in University College. In all these matters he seems to have won more or less definite accomplishment, and from most of them his versatile literary talent took, at one time or another, an effective toll. The athletic musician, who composed his own songs and gloried in a gallop, was to make verse simulate, as hardly any artificer had made it before, the labyrinthine meanderings of the fugue and the rhythmic swing of hoofs.

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[1] *To E. B. B.*, Aug. 22, 1846.

Of all these varied aims and aspirations, of all in short that was going on under the surface of this brilliant and versatile Robert Browning of twenty, we have a chaotic reflection in the famous fragment *Pauline.* The quite peculiar animosity with which its author in later life regarded this single "crab" of his youthful tree of knowledge only adds to its interest. He probably resented the frank expression of passion, nowhere else approached in his works. Yet passion only agitates the surface of *Pauline.* Whether Pauline herself stand for an actual woman—Miss Flower or another—or for the nascent spell of womanhood—she plays, for one who is ostensibly the heroine of the poem, a discouragingly minor part. No wonder she felt tempted to advise the burning of so unflattering a record. Instead of the lyric language of love, she has to receive the confessions of a subtle psychologist, who must unlock the tumultuous story of his soul "before he can sing." And these confessions are of a kind rare even amongst self-revelations of genius. Pauline's lover is a dreamer, but a dreamer of an uncommon species. He is preoccupied with the processes of his mind, but his mind ranges wildly over the universe and chafes at the limitations it is forced to recognise. Mill, a master, not to say a pedant, of introspection, recognised with amazement the "intense self-consciousness" of this poet, and self-consciousness is the keynote which persists through all its changing harmonies. It is the self-consciousness of a soul compelled by quick and eager senses and vivid intelligence to recognise a host of outer realities not itself, which it constantly strives to bring into relation with itself, as constantly baffled and thrown back by the obstinate objectivity of that outer world. A pure dreamer would have "contentedly lived in a nut-shell and imagined himself king of infinite space"; a purely scientific intelligence would have applied himself to the patient mastery of facts; in the hero of *Pauline* the despotic senses and intellect of science and the imperious imagination of the poet appear to coexist and to contend, and he tosses to and fro in a fever of fitful efforts, continually frustrated, to find complete spiritual response and expressiveness in the intractable maze of being. There had indeed been an earlier time when the visions of old poets had wholly sufficed him; and the verses in which he recalls them have almost the pellucid charm of Homer,—

> "Never morn broke clear as those
> On the dim clustered isles in the blue sea,
> The deep groves, and white temples, and wet caves."

But growing intellect demanded something more. Shelley, the "Sun-treader," weaving soul and sense into a radiant vesture "from his poet's station between both," did much to sustain him; Plato's more explicit and systematic idealism gave him for a while a stronger assurance. But disillusion broke in: "Suddenly, without heart-wreck I awoke; I said, 'twas beautiful, yet but a dream, and so adieu to it!" Then the passionate restlessness of his nature stings him forth afresh. He steeps himself in the concrete vitality of things, lives in imagination through "all life where it is most alive," immerses himself in all that is most beautiful and intense in Nature, so fulfilling, it might seem, his passionate craving to "be all, have, see, know, taste, feel all,"—yet only to feel that satisfaction is not here:

> "My soul saddens when it looks beyond:
> I cannot be immortal, taste all joy;"

only the sickness of satiety. But when all joy was tasted, what then? If there was any "crowning" state, it could only be, thought Browning, one in which the soul looked up to the unattainable infinity of God.

Such seem to be the outlines of the mental history which passes before us, brilliant and incoherent as a dream, in *Pauline*. The material, vast and many-sided as it is, is not fully mastered; but there is nothing merely imitative; it is everywhere Browning, and no mere disciple of Shelley or another, who is palpably at work. The influence of Shelley seems, indeed, to have been already outgrown when *Pauline* was written; Browning gloried in him and in his increasing fame, but he felt that his own aims and destiny were different. Rossetti, a few years later, took *Pauline* to be the work of an unconscious pre-Raphaelite; and there is enough of subtle simplicity, of curious minuteness, in the details to justify the error. In the meantime many outward circumstances conspired to promote the "advance" which every line of it foretold. His old mentor of the *Incondita* days, W. J. Fox, in some sort a Browningite before Browning, reviewed *Pauline* in *The Monthly Repository* (April 1833) with generous but discerning praise. This was the beginning of a warm friendship between the two, which ended only with Fox's death. It was founded upon hearty admiration on both sides, and no man living was better qualified to scatter the morbid films that clung about the expanding genius of young Browning than this robust and masculine critic and preacher. A few months later came an event of which we know very little, but which at least did much to detach him from the limited horizons of Camberwell. At the invitation of M. Benckhausen, Russian consul-general, Browning accompanied him, in the winter of 1833-34, on a special mission to St Petersburg. The journey left few apparent traces on his work. But he remembered the rush of the sledge through the forest when, half a century later, he told the thrilling tale of *Iván Ivánovitch.* And even the modest intimacy with affairs of State obtainable in the office of a consul-general seems to have led his thoughts seriously to diplomacy as a career. One understands that to the future dissector of a Hohenstiel-Schwangau and a Blougram the career might present attractions. It marks the seriousness of his ambition that he actually applied for a post in the Persian Embassy. This fancy of *Ferishtah*, like a similar one of ten years later, was not gratified, but the bent which was thus thwarted in practical life disported itself freely in poetry, and the marks of the diplomatist *in posse* are pretty clearly legible in the subtle political webs which make up so much of the plots of *Strafford*, *King Victor*, and *Sordello*.

But much sharper rebuffs than this would have failed to disturb the immense buoyancy of Browning's temperament. He was twenty-three, and in the first flush of conscious power. His exuberant animal spirits flowed out in whimsical talk; he wrote letters of the gayest undergraduate *insouciance* to Fox, and articles full of extravagant jesting for *The Trifler*, an amateur journal which received the lucubrations of his little circle. He enjoyed life like a boy, and shared its diversions like a man about town. These superficial vivacities were the slighter play of a self-consciousness which in its deeper recesses was steadily gathering power, richness, and assurance. His keen social instincts saved him from most of the infirmities of budding genius; but the poems he contributed to Fox's journal during the following two years (1834-36) show a significant predilection for imagining the extravagances and fanaticisms of lonely self-centred minds. Joannes Agricola, sublime on the dizzy pinnacle of his theological arrogance, looking up through the gorgeous roof of heaven and assured that nothing can stay his course to his destined abode, God's breast; Porphyria's lover, the more uncanny fanatic who murders with a smile; the young man who in his pride of power sees in the failures and mistakes of other men examples providentially intended for his guidance,—it was such subjects as these that touched Browning's fancy in those ardent and sanguine years. He probably entered with keener relish into these extravagances than his maturer wisdom approved. It is significant, at any rate, that when *Agricola* and *Porphyria's Lover* were republished in *The Bells and Pomegranates* of 1842, a new title, *Madhouse Cells*, gave warning that their insanity was not to be attributed to the poet. The verses "Still ailing wind," he qualified in a yet more explicit fashion twenty years later, for they are the young man's poem which James Lee's wife reads "under the cliff," and subjects to her austere and disillusioned criticism. But they mark the drift of Browning of the mid-'Thirties, so far as they go, clearly enough. Fortunately, however, we are not dependent upon these slight clues. For during the winter months of 1834-35 he was occupied in portraying a far more imposing embodiment of the young man's pride of power, a Joannes Agricola of equally superb confidence and far more magnificent ideals. In April 1835 Browning was able to announce to his good friend Fox the completion of *Paracelsus*.

He owed the suggestion to another new acquaintance, whose intimacy, like that of the Russian consul-general, marks the fascination exercised by young Browning upon men of antecedents, race, and social standing widely different from his own. Count Amédée de Ripert Monclar was a French royalist and refugee; he was also an enthusiastic student of history. Possibly he recognised an affinity between the vaguely outlined dreams of Pauline's lover and those of the historic Paracelsus; and he may well have thought that the task of grappling with definite historic material would steady the young poet's hand. We could applaud the acuteness of the suggestion with more confidence had not the Count had an unlucky afterthought, which he regarded as fatal, to the effect that the story of Paracelsus, however otherwise adapted to the creator of Pauline's lover, was entirely destitute of a Pauline. There was no opening for love. But Pauline, with all her warm erotic charms and her sparkling French prose, was the most unsubstantial and perishable thing in the poem which bore her name: she and the spirit which begot her had vanished like a noisome smoke, and Browning threw himself with undiminished ardour upon the task of interpreting a career in which the sole sources of romance and of tragedy appeared to be the passion for knowledge and the arrogance of discovery.

For it is quite clear that, whatever criticisms Browning finally brought to bear upon Paracelsus, his attitude towards him, at no time hostile, was at the outset rather that of a literary champion, vindicating a man of original genius from the calumnies of ignorance and dulness. This view, then rather unusual, was a very natural one for him to take, Paracelsus being among the many keen interests of the elder Browning.[1] It is a strange mistake to suppose, with a recent very ingenious commentator, that Browning, eager to destroy the fallacy of intellectual pride, singled out Paracelsus as a crucial example of the futilities of intellect. On the contrary, he filled his annotations with documentary evidences which attest not only the commanding scientific genius of Paracelsus, but the real significance of his achievements, even for the modern world. In the intellectual hunger of Paracelsus, in that "insatiable avidity of penetrating the secrets of nature" which his follower Bitiskius (approvingly quoted by Browning) ascribed to him, he saw a fascinating realisation of his own vague and chaotic "restlessness." Here was a spirit made up in truth "of an intensest life," driven hither and thither by the hunger for intellectual mastery of the universe; and Browning, far from convicting him of intellectual futility, has made him actually divine the secret he sought, and, in one of the most splendid passages of modern poetry, declare with his dying lips a faith which is no less Browning's than his own.

While he thus lavished his utmost power on portraying the soaring genius of Paracelsus, as he conceived it, he turned impatiently away from the husk of popular legend by which it was half obscured. He shrank from no attested fact, however damaging; but he brushed away the accretions of folklore, however picturesque. The attendant spirit who enabled Paracelsus to work his marvellous cures, and his no less renowned Sword, were for Browning contemptible futilities. Yet a different way of treating legend lay nearer to the spirit of contemporary poetry. Goethe had not long before evolved his Mephistopheles from the "attendant spirit" attached by that same sixteenth century to the Paracelsus of Protestantism, Faust; Tennyson was already meditating a scene full of the enchantment of the Arthurian sword Excalibur. Browning's peremptory rejection of such springs of poetry marks one of his limitations as a poet. Much of the finest poetry of *Faust*, as, in a lower degree, of the *Idylls*, is won by a subtle transformation of the rude stuff of popular imagination: for Browning, with rare exceptions, this rude stuff was dead matter, impervious to his poetic insight, and irresponsive to the magic of his touch. Winnowing the full ears, catching eagerly the solid and stimulating grain, he hardly heeded the golden gleam of the chaff as it flew by.

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[1] His library, as I am informed by Prof. Hall Griffin, contained a copy of the works of Paracelsus, doubtless that used by his son.

He did not, however, refrain from accentuating his view of the story by interweaving in it some gracious figures of his own. Festus, the honest, devoted, but somewhat purblind friend, who offers Paracelsus the criticism of sober common-sense, and is vindicated—at the bar of common-sense—by his great comrade's tragic end; Michal, an exquisitely tender outline of womanhood, even more devoted, and even less distinguished; and the "Italian poet" Aprile, a creature of genius, whose single overpowering thought avails to break down the stronghold of Paracelsus's else unassailable conviction. Aprile, who lives for love as Paracelsus for knowledge, is not to be identified with Shelley, but he has unmistakable Shelleyan traits, and the dreamy pageant of his imaginary creations might stand for a summary review of Shelley's work. Had Shelley lived, he might have come nearer than any one else to fulfilling the rounded and complete ideal of which Paracelsus and Aprile were dissevered halves: the greater part of his actual achievement belonged, Browning evidently thought, to the category of those dazzling but imperfectly objective visions which he ascribes to his Aprile. But Shelley —the poet of *Alastor*, the passionate "lover of Love," was yet the fittest embodiment of that other finer spiritual energy which Paracelsus in his Faustian passion for knowledge had ruthlessly put from him. Sixteen years later, Browning was to define in memorable words what he held to be the "noblest and predominating characteristic of Shelley"—viz., "his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the Absolute and of Beauty and Good in the concrete, while he throws, from his poet's station between both, swifter, subtler, and more numerous films for the connection of each with each than have been thrown by any modern artificer of whom I have knowledge." This divining and glorifying power it is that Browning ascribes to Love; the lack of it is in his conception the tragic flaw which brings to the ground the superbly gifted genius of Paracelsus. This genuine and original tragic motive is not worked out with uniform power; his degeneration, his failures, are painted with the uncertain hand of one little acquainted with either. But all the splendour of a young imagination, charged with the passion for truth and for beauty, glows in the pictures of the great moments in Paracelsus's career,—the scene in the quiet Würzburg garden, where he conquers the doubts of Festus and Michal by the magnificent assurance of his faith in his divine calling; and that in the hospital cell at Salzburg, where his fading mind anticipates at the point of death the clearness of immortal vision as he lays bare the conquered secret of the world.

That Paracelsian secret of the world was for Browning doubtless the truth, though he never again expounded it so boldly. Paracelsus's reply to the anxious inquiry of Festus whether he is sure of God's forgiveness: "I have lived! We have to live alone to well set forth God's praise"—might stand as a text before the works of Browning. In all life he sees the promise and the potency of God,—in the teeming vitalities of the lower world, in the creative energies of man, in the rich conquests of his Art, in his myth-woven Nature. "God is glorified in Man, and to man's glory vowed I soul and limb."

The historic Paracelsus failed most signally in his attempt to connect vast conceptions of Nature akin to this with the detail of his empiric discoveries. Browning, with his mind, as always, set upon things psychical, attributes to him a parallel incapacity to connect his far-reaching vision of humanity with the gross, malicious, or blockish specimens of the genus Man whom he encountered in the detail of practice. It was the problem which Browning himself was to face, and in his own view triumphantly to solve; and Paracelsus, rising into the clearness of his dying vision, becomes the mouthpiece of Browning's own criticism of his failure, the impassioned advocate of the Love which with him is less an elemental energy drawing things into harmonious fusion than a subtle weapon of the intellect, making it wise

> "To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind,
> To know even hate is but a mask of love's,
> To see a good in evil and a hope
> In ill-success."

Paracelsus is a clear self-revelation, rich and inspired where it marks out the circle of sublime ideas within which the poet was through life to move, and by which he was, as a man and a thinker, if not altogether as a poet, to live; reticent where it approaches the complexities of the concrete which the poet was not yet sufficiently mature to handle, restrained where increased power was to breed a too generous self-indulgence, a too manifest aptitude for glorying and drinking deep. It is flushed with the peculiar mellow beauty which comes if at all to the early manhood of genius,—a beauty like that of Amiens or Lincoln in Gothic art, where the crudeness of youth is overworn, and the problems of full maturity, though foreshadowed and foreseen, have not yet begun to perplex or to disintegrate.

CHAPTER II.

ENLARGING HORIZONS. *SORDELLO.*

> Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust,
> Die eine will sich von der andern trennen;
> Die eine hält in derber Liebeslust
> Sich an die Welt mit klammernden Organen;
> Die andre hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dust
> Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen.
>
> —*Faust.*

PARACELSUS, though only a series of quasi-dramatic scenes, suggested considerable undeveloped capacity for drama. From a career in which the most sensational event was a dismissal from a professorship, and the absorbing passion the thirst for knowledge, he had elicited a tragedy of the scientific intellect. But it was equally obvious that the writer's talent was not purely dramatic; and that his most splendid and original endowments required some other medium than drama for their full unfolding. The author of *Paracelsus* was primarily concerned with character, and with action as the mirror of character; agreeing in both points substantially with the author of *Hamlet*. But while Browning's energetic temperament habitually impelled him to represent character in action, his imaginative strength did not lie in the region of action at all, but in the region of thought; the kinds of expression of which he had boundless command were rather those which analyse character than those which exhibit it. The two impulses derived from temperament and from imagination thus drew him in somewhat diverse directions; and for some years the joy in the stir and stress and many-sided life of drama competed with the powerful bent of the portrayer of souls, until the two contending currents finally coalesced in the dramatic monologues of *Men and Women.* In 1835 the solution was not yet found, but the five years which followed were to carry Browning, not without crises of perplexity and hesitation, far on his way towards it. *Paracelsus* was no sooner completed than he entered upon his kindred but more esoteric portrayal of the soul-history of Sordello,—a study in which, with the dramatic form, almost all the dramatic excellences of its predecessors are put aside. But the poet was outgrowing the method; the work hung fire; and we find him, before he had gone far with the perplexed record of that "ineffectual angel," already "eager to freshen a jaded mind by diverting it to the healthy natures of a grand epoch."[1]

The open-eyed man of the world and of affairs in Browning was plainly clamouring for more expression than he had yet found. An invitation from the first actor of the day to write a tragedy for him was not likely, under these circumstances, to be declined; and during the whole winter of 1836-37 the story of Sordello remained untold, while its author plunged, with a security and relish which no one who knew only his poetry could have foretold, into the pragmatic politics and diplomatic intrigues of *Strafford*. The performance of the play on May 1, 1837 introduced further distractions. And *Sordello* had made little further progress, when, in the April of the following year, Browning embarked on a sudden but memorable trip to the South of Europe. It gave him his first glimpse of Italy and of the Mediterranean, and plenty of the rough homely intercourse with men which he loved. He travelled, in a fashion that suited his purse and his hardy nature, by a merchant vessel from London to the Adriatic. The food was uneatable, the horrors of dirt and discomfort portentous; but he bore them cheerfully for the sake of one advantage,—"the solitariness of the *one* passenger among all those rough new creatures. *I* like it much, and soon get deep into their friendship."[1] Grim tragedies of the high-seas, too, came within his ken.[2] Two or three moments of the voyage stand out for us with peculiar distinctness: the gorgeous sunset off Cadiz bay, when he watched the fading outlines of Gibraltar and Cape St Vincent,—ghostly mementos of England,—not as Arnold's weary Titan, but as a Herakles stretching a hand of help across the seas; the other sunset on the Mediterranean, when Etna loomed against the flaming sky;[1] and, between them, that glaring noontide on the African shore, when the "solitary passenger," weary of shipboard and sea sickness, longed for his good horse York in the stable at home, and scribbled his ballad of brave horses, *How they brought the Good News*, in a blank leaf of Bartoli's *Simboli*. The voyage ended at Trieste; and thence he passed to Venice, brooded among her ruined palaces over Sordello, and "English Eyebright" and all the destiny and task of the poet; and so turned homeward, through the mountains, gathering vivid glimpses as he went of "all my places and castles,"[2] and laying by a memory, soon to germinate, of "delicious Asolo," "palpably fire-clothed" in the glory of his young imagination.

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[1] Preface to the first edition of *Strafford* (subsequently omitted).

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[1] *R. B.* to *E. B. B.*, i. 505.

[2] Cf. the long letter to Miss Haworth, Orr, *Life*, p. 96.

Thus when, in 1840, *Sordello* was at length complete, it bore the traces of many influences and many moods. It reflected the expanding ideals and the critical turning-points of four years of his life. In the earlier books the brilliant yet self-centred poet of *Paracelsus* is still paramount, and even the "oddish boy" who had shyly evolved *Pauline* is not entirely effaced. But in the later books we recognise without difficulty the man who has mixed with the larger world, has won some fame in letters, has immersed himself in the stirring atmosphere of a supreme national conflict, has seen Italy, and has, in the solitude and detachment from his *milieu* which foreign travel brings, girded up his loins anew for a larger and more exacting poetic task. The tangled political dissensions of the time are set before us with the baffling allusiveness of the expert. The Italian landscape is painted, not with richer imagination, for nothing in Browning exceeds some passages of the earlier books, but with more depth of colouring, more precision of contour and expression. And he has taken the "sad disheveled form," Humanity, for his bride, the mate of an art which will disdain no evil and turn away from nothing common, in the service of man. Doubtless the result was not all gain. The intermittent composition and the shifting points of view add an element of real ambiguity and indecision to faults of expression which mainly spring from the swiftness and discursiveness of a brilliant and athletic intellect. The alleged "obscurity" of the poem is in great part a real obscurity; the profiles are at times not merely intricate, but blurred. But he had written nothing yet, and he was to write little after, which surpasses the finest pages of *Sordello* in close-packed, if somewhat elusive, splendour; the soil, as he wrote of Italy, is full of loose fertility, and gives out intoxicating odours at every footfall. Moreover, he can now paint the clash and commotion of crowds, the turmoil of cities and armies, with superb force—a capacity of which there is hardly a trace in *Paracelsus*. Sordello himself stands out less clearly than Paracelsus from the canvas; but the sympathetic reader finally admits that this visionary being, who gleams ghostlike at the end of all the avenues and vistas of the poem, whom we are always looking at but never rightly see, is an even more fascinating figure.

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[1] Cf. *Sordello*, bk. iii., end.

[2] Ib., p. 99.

He is however less historical, in spite of the abstruse historic background upon which he moves. Of the story of Paracelsus Browning merely reinterpreted the recorded facts; whereas he brushes aside the greater part of the Sordello story, as told confusedly and inconsistently by Italian and Provençal tradition. The whole later career of the Mantuan poet as an accomplished and not unsuccessful man of the world, as the friend of Raymond of Toulouse and Charles of Anjou, rewarded with ample estates by the latter for substantial services,—is either rejected as myth, or purposely ignored. To all appearance, the actual Sordello by no means lacked ability to "fit to the finite" such "infinity" as he possessed. And if he had the chance, as is obscurely hinted at the close, of becoming, like Dante, the "Apollo" of the Italian people, he hardly missed it "through disbelief that anything was to be done." But the outward shell of his career included some circumstances which, had they befallen a Dante, might have deeply moulded the history of Italy. His close relations with great Guelph and Ghibelline families would have offered extraordinary opportunities to a patriot of genius, which, for the purposes of patriotism, remained unused. Yet Dante, a patriot of genius if ever there was one, had given Sordello a position of extraordinary honour in the *Purgatory*, had allowed him to illuminate the darkness of Virgil, and to guide both the great poets towards the Gate. The contrast offered an undeniable problem. But Dante had himself hinted the solution by placing Sordello among those dilatory souls whose tardy repentance involved their sojourn in the Ante-purgatory. To a mind preoccupied, like Browning's, with the failures of aspiring souls, this hint naturally appealed. He imagined his Sordello, too, as a moral loiterer, who, with extraordinary gifts, failed by some inner enervating paralysis[1] to make his spiritual quality explicit; and who impressed contemporaries sufficiently to start a brilliant myth of what he did not do, but had to wait for recognition until he met the eye and lips of Dante. It is difficult not to suspect the influence of another great poet. *Sordello* has no nearer parallel in literature than Goethe's *Tasso*, a picture of the eternal antagonism between the poet and the world, for which Sordello's failure to "fit to the finite his infinity" might have served as an apt motto. Browning has nowhere to our knowledge mentioned *Tasso;* but he has left on record his admiration of the beautiful sister-drama *Iphigenie.*[2]

The elaboration of this conception is, however, entirely Browning's own, and discloses at every point the individual quality of his mind. Like *Faust*, like the Poet in the *Palace of Art*, Sordello bears the stamp of an age in which the ideal of intellect, art, culture, and the ideal of humanity, of social service, have both become potent inspirations, often in apparent conflict, and continually demanding a solution of their differences. Faust breaks away from the narrow pedantries of the schools in order to heap upon his breast the weal and woe of mankind, and to draw all their life and thought into the compass of his mind. Tennyson's "glorious devil" (by a curious irony intended for no other than Faust's creator) sets up his lordly pleasure-house apart from the ways of men, until at last, confuted by experience, he renounces his folly. *Sordello* cannot claim the mature and classical brilliance of the one, nor the limpid melodious beauty of the other; but it approaches *Faust* itself in its subtle soundings of the mysteries of the intellectual life. It is a young poet's attempt to cope with the problem of the poet's task and the poet's function, the relation of art to life, and of life to art. Neither Goethe nor Tennyson thought more loftily of the possibilities of poetic art. And neither insisted more peremptorily—or rather assumed more unquestioningly—that it only fulfils these possibilities when the poet labours in the service of man. He is "earth's essential king," but his kingship rests upon his carrying out the kingliest of mottoes—"Ich dien." Browning all his life had a hearty contempt for the foppery of "Art for Art," and he never conveyed it with more incisive brilliance than in the sketch of Sordello's "opposite," the Troubadour Eglamor.

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[1] "Ah but to find
A certain mood enervate such a mind," &c.
—*Works*, i. 122.

[2] *To E. B. B.*, July 7, 1846. He is "vexed" at Landor's disparagement of the play, and quotes with approval Landor's earlier declaration that "nothing so Hellenic had been written these two thousand years."

> "How he loved that art!
> The calling marking him a man apart
> From men—one not to care, take counsel for
> Cold hearts, comfortless faces, . . . since verse, the gift
> Was his, and men, the whole of them, must shift
> Without it."

To Eglamor his art is a mysterious ritual, of which he is the sacrosanct priest, and his happy rhyme the divine response vouchsafed to him in answer. Such beauty as he produces is no effluence from a soul mating itself, like Wordsworth's, "in love and holy passion with the universe," but a cunning application of the approved recipes for effective writing current in the literary guild;—

> "He, no genius rare,
> Transfiguring in fire or wave or air
> At will, but a poor gnome that, cloistered up
> In some rock-chamber, with his agate-cup,
> His topaz-rod, his seed-pearl, in these few
> And their arrangement finds enough to do
> For his best art."[1]

From these mysticisms and technicalities of Troubadour and all other poetic guilds Browning decisively detaches his poet. Sordello is not a votary of poetry; he does not "cultivate the Muse"; he does not even

[1] Works, i. 131.

prostrate himself before the beauty and wonder of the visible universe. Poetry is the atmosphere in which he lives; and in the beauty without he recognises the "dream come true" of a soul which (like that of Pauline's lover) "existence" thus "cannot satiate, cannot surprise." "Laugh thou at envious fate," adorers cry to this inspired Platonist,

> "Who, from earth's simplest combination . . .
> Dost soar to heaven's complexest essence, rife
> With grandeurs, unaffronted to the last,
> Equal to being all."[1]

And, in truth, his power of imaginative apprehension has no bounds. From the naïve self-reflection of his boyish dreams he passes on to visions which embrace a continually fuller measure of life, until he forestalls the sublime Dantesque conception of a poetry vast and deep as humanity, where every soul will stand forth revealed in its naked truth. But he cannot, like Dante, put his vast conceptions into the shackles of intelligible speech. His uncompromising "infinity" will not comply with finite conditions, and he remains an inefficient and inarticulate genius, a Hamlet of poetry.

In the second half of the poem the Hamlet of poetry becomes likewise a Hamlet of politics. He aspires to serve the people otherwise than by holding up to them the mirror of an all-revealing poetry. Though by birth associated with the aristocratic and imperial Ghibellines, his natural affinity is clearly with the Church, which in some sort stood for the people against the nobles, and for spirit against brute force. We see him, now, a frail, inspired Shelleyan[1] democrat, pleading the Guelph cause before the great Ghibelline soldier Salinguerra,—as he had once pitted the young might of native song against the accomplished Troubadour Eglamor. Salinguerra is the foil of the political, as Eglamor of the literary, Sordello, and the dramatic interest of the whole poem focusses in those two scenes. He had enough of the lonely inspiration of genius to vanquish the craftsman, but too little of its large humanity to cope with the astute man of the world. When Salinguerra, naturally declining his naïve entreaty that he should put his Ghibelline sword at the service of the Guelph, offers Sordello, on his part, the command of the imperial forces in Italy if he will remain true to the Ghibelline cause, he makes this finite world more alluring than it had ever been before to the "infinite" Sordello. After a long struggle, he renounces the offer, and — dies, exhausted with the strain of choice.

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[1] Works, i. 122.

What was Browning's judgment upon Sordello? Does he regard him as an idealist of aims too lofty for success in this world, and whose "failure" implied his triumph in another, where his "broken arc" would become the "perfect round"? Assuredly not. That might indeed be his destiny, but Browning makes it perfectly clear that he failed, not because his ideal was incommensurate with the conditions in which he lived, but because he lacked the supreme gift by which the greatest of souls may find their function and create their sphere in the least promising *milieu*, — a controlling and guiding passion of love. With compassionate tenderness, as of a father to his wayward child, Browning in the closing pages of the poem lays his finger on the ailing place. "Ah, my Sordello, I this once befriend and speak for you." It was true enough, in the past, that Soul, as belonging to Eternity, must needs prove incomplete for Time. But is life to be therefore only a struggle to escape from the shackles of the body? Is freedom only won by death? No, rejoins the poet, and the reply comes from the heart of his poetry, though at issue with much of his explicit doctrine; a harmony of soul and body is possible here in which both fulfil their functions:

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[1] There are other Shelleyan traits in *Sordello—e.g.*, the young witch image (as in *Pauline*) at the opening of the second book.

> "Like yonder breadth of watery heaven, a bay,
> And that sky-space of water, ray for ray
> And star for star, one richness where they mixed,"

the Soul seeing its way in Time without being either dazzled by, or losing, its vision of Eternity, having the saving clue of Love. Dante, for whom Love was the pervading spirit of the universe, and the beginning and end of his inspiration, wrought his vision of eternal truth and his experience of the passing lives of men into such a harmony with unexampled power; and the comparison, implicit in every page of *Sordello*, is driven home with almost scornful bitterness on the last:—

> "What he should have been,
> Could be, and was not—the one step too mean
> For him to take—we suffer at this day
> Because of: Ecelin had pushed away
> Its chance ere Dante could arrive and take
> That step Sordello spurned, for the world's sake.
> . . . A sorry farce
> Such life is, after all!"

The publication of *Sordello* in 1840 closes the first phase of Browning's literary career. By the great majority of those who had hailed the splendid promise of *Paracelsus*, the author of *Sordello* was frankly given up. Surprisingly few thought it worth while to wrestle with the difficult book. It was the day of the gentle literary public which had a few years before recoiled from *Sartor Resartus*, and which found in the difficulty of a book the strongest presumption against it. A later generation, leavened by Carlyle, came near to regarding difficulty as a presumption in its favour, and this more strenuous and athletic attitude towards literature was among the favouring conditions which brought Browning at length into vogue.

CHAPTER III.

MATURING METHODS. DRAMAS AND DRAMATIC LYRICS.

> Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
> No man hath walk'd along our roads with step
> So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
> So varied in discourse.
>
> —LANDOR.

THE memorable moment when Browning, standing on the ruined palace-step at Venice, had taken Humanity for his mate, opened an epoch in his poetic life to which the later books of *Sordello* form a splendid prelude. For the Browning of 1840 it was no longer a sufficient task to trace the epochs in the spiritual history of lonely idealists, to pursue the problem of existence in minds themselves preoccupied with its solution. "Soul" is still his fundamental preoccupation; but the continued play of an eager intellect and vivacious senses upon life has immensely multiplied the points of concrete experience which it vivifies and transfigures to his eyes. It is as if a painter trained in the school of Raphael or Lionardo had discovered that he could use the minute and fearless brush of the Flemings in the service of their ideals. He pursues soul in all its rich multiplicity, in the tortuosities and dark abysses of character; he forces crowds of sordid, grotesque, or commonplace facts to become its expressive speech; he watches its thought and passion projected into the tide of affairs, caught up in the clash and tangle of plot. In all these three ways the Dramas and Dramatic Lyrics and Romances, which were to be his poetic occupation during the Forties, detach themselves sharply from *Paracelsus* and the early books of *Sordello*. A poem like *The Laboratory* (1844), for instance, stands at almost the opposite pole of art to these. All that Browning neglected or veiled in *Paracelsus* he here thrusts into stern relief. The passion and crime there faintly discerned in the background of ideally beautiful figures are here his absorbing theme. The curious technicalities of the chemist's workshop, taken for granted in *Paracelsus*, are now painted with a realism reminiscent of Romeo's Apothecary and *The Alchemist*. And the outward drama of intrigue, completely effaced in *Paracelsus* by the inward drama of soul, sounds delusive scorn and laughter in the background, the more sinister because it is not seen. These lyrics and romances are "dramatic" not only in the sense that the speakers express, as Browning insisted, other minds and sentiments than his own, but in the more legitimate sense that they are plucked as it were out of the living organism of a drama, all the vital issues of which can be read in their self-revelation.

A poet whose lyrics were of this type might be expected to find in drama proper his free, full, and natural expression. This was not altogether the case with Browning, who, despite an unquenchable appetency for drama, did better work in his dramatic monologues than in his plays. The drama alone allowed full scope for the development of plot-interest. But it was less favourable to another yet more deeply rooted interest of his. Not only did action and outward event—the stuff of drama—interest Browning chiefly as "incidents in the development of soul," but they became congenial to his art only as projected upon some other mind, and tinged with its feeling and its thought. Half the value of a story for him lay in the colours it derived from the narrator's personality; and he told his own experience, as he uttered his own convictions, most easily and effectively through alien lips. For a like reason he loved to survey the slow continuities of actual events from the standpoint of a given moment, under the conditions of perspective and illusion which it imposed. Both these conditions were less well satisfied by drama, which directly "imitates action," than by the dramatic speech or monologue, which imitates action as focussed in a particular mind. And Browning's dramatic genius found its most natural and effective outlet in the wealth of implicit drama which he concentrated in these salient moments tense with memory and hope. The insuppressible alertness and enterprise of his own mind tells upon his portrayal of these intense moments. He sees passion not as a blinding fume, but as a flame, which enlarges the area, and quickens the acuteness, of vision; the background grows alive with moving shapes. To the stricken girl in *Ye Banks and Braes* memory is torture, and she thrusts convulsively from her, like dagger-points, the intolerable loveliness of the things that remind her of her love; whereas the victim of *The Confessional* pours forth from her frenzied lips every detail of her tragic story.

So in *The Laboratory*, once more, all the strands of the implicit drama are seen like incandescent filaments in the glow of a single moment of fierce impassioned consciousness:—

> "He is with her, and they know that I know
> Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow
> While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
> Empty church, to pray God in, for them!—I am here."

Both kinds—drama and dramatic lyric—continued to attract him, while neither altogether satisfied; and they engaged him concurrently throughout the decade.

In this power of seizing the salient moment of a complex situation and laying bare at a stroke all its issues, Browning's monologues have no nearer parallel than the Imaginary Conversations of Landor, which illuminate with so strange a splendour so many unrecorded scenes of the great drama of history. To

Landor, according to his wife's testimony, Browning "always said that he owed more than to any contemporary"; to Landor he dedicated the last volume of the *Bells and Pomegranates*. Landor, on his part, hailed in Browning the "inquiring eye" and varied discourse of a second Chaucer. It is hardly rash to connect with his admiration for the elder artist Browning's predilection for these brief revealing glimpses into the past. Browning cared less for the actual *personnel* of history, and often imagined his speakers as well as their talk; but he imagined them with an equal instinct for seizing the expressive traits of nationalities and of times, and a similar, if more spontaneous and naïve, anti-feudal temper. The French camp and the Spanish cloister, *Gismond* and *My Last Duchess* (originally called *France* and *Italy*), are penetrated with the spirit of peoples, ages, and institutions as seized by a historical student of brilliant imagination and pronounced antipathies.

But in one point Landor and Browning stood at opposite poles. Landor, far beyond any contemporary English example, had the classic sense and mastery of style; Browning's individuality of manner rested on a robust indifference to all the traditional conventions of poetic speech. The wave of realism which swept over English letters in the early 'Forties broke down many barriers of language; the new things that had to be said demanded new ways of saying them; homely, grotesque, or sordid life was rendered in sordid, grotesque, and homely terms. *Pickwick* in 1837 had established the immense vogue of Dickens, the *Heroes* in 1840 had assured the imposing prestige of Carlyle; and the example of both made for the freest and boldest use of language. Across the Channel the stupendous fabric of the *Comédie Humaine* was approaching completion, and Browning was one of Balzac's keenest English readers. Alone among the greater poets of the time Browning was in genius and temperament a true kinsman to these great romantic realists; his poetry, as it emerged in the rich dramatic harvest of the 'Forties, is the nearest counterpart and analogue of their prose.

I.

Browning's first drama, as is well known, was the result of a direct application from Macready. Introduced in November 1835 by his "literary father" Fox, Browning immediately interested the actor. A reading of *Paracelsus* convinced him that Browning could write, if not a good play, yet one with an effective tragic *rôle* for himself. Strained relations with his company presently made him eager to procure this service. Browning, suddenly appealed to (in May 1836), promptly suggested *Strafford*. He was full of the subject, having recently assisted his friend Forster in compiling his life. The actor closed with the suggestion, and a year later (May 1, 1837) the play was performed at Covent Garden. The fine acting of Macready, and of Helen Faucit, who was now associated with him, procured the piece a moderate success. It went through five performances.

Browning's *Strafford*, like his *Paracelsus*, was a serious attempt to interpret a historic character; and historic experts like Gardiner have, as regards the central figure, emphatically indorsed his judgment. The other persons, and the action itself, he treated more freely, with evident regard to their value as secondary elements in the portrayal of Strafford; and it is easy to trace in the whole manner of his innovations the well-marked ply of his mind. The harsh and rugged fanaticisms, the splendid frivolities, of the seventeenth century, fade and lose substance in an atmosphere charged with idealism and self-consciousness. Generous self-devotion is not the universal note, but it is the prevailing key, that in which the writer most naturally thinks and most readily invents. Strafford's devotion to Charles and Pym's to his country were historical; but Browning accentuates Pym's heroism by making the man he sends to the scaffold his old friend; and devotion is the single trait of the beautiful but imaginary character of Lucy Carlisle. "Give me your notion of a thorough self-devotement, self-forgetting," he wrote a few years later to Miss Flower: the idea seems to have been already busy moulding his still embryonic invention of character. Something of the visionary exaltation of the dying Paracelsus thus hangs over the final scene in which Strafford goes to meet the fate which the one friend imposes on him and the other cannot turn aside. All the characters have something of the "deep self-consciousness" of the author of *Pauline*. Not that they are, any of them, drawn with very profound grasp of human nature or a many-sided apprehension of life. They are either absolutely simple, like Lady Carlisle, or built upon a rivalry or conflict of simple elements, like Strafford and Charles; but there is so much restless vivacity in their discourse, the broad surface of mood is so incessantly agitated by the play and cross-play of thought and feeling, that they seem more complex than they are.

Though played for only five nights, *Strafford* had won a success which might well have dazzled a young and untried aspirant, and which was sufficiently impressive to shrewd men of business like Messrs Longman to induce them to undertake its publication free of cost. It appeared in April, with an interesting preface, subsequently withdrawn, from which a significant sentence has already been quoted. The composition of *Strafford* had not only "freshened a jaded mind" but permanently quickened his zest for the drama of political crises. New projects for historical dramas chased and jostled one another through his busy brain, which seems to have always worked most prosperously in a highly charged atmosphere. I am going "to begin . . . thinking a Tragedy," he wrote characteristically to Miss Haworth—"(an Historical one, so I shall want heaps of criticisms on *Strafford*), and I want to have *another* tragedy in prospect; I write best so provided."[1]

The "Historical Tragedies" here foreshadowed, *King Victor and King Charles* and *The Return of the Druses*, were eventually published as the Second and Fourth of the *Bells and Pomegranates*, in 1842-43. How little Browning cared for history except as a quarry for psychical problems, how little concern he had at bottom with the changing drama of national life, is clear from the directions in which he now sought his good. In *Strafford* as in *Paracelsus*, and even in *Sordello*, the subject had made some appeal to the interest in great epochs and famous men. Henceforth his attitude, as a dramatist, to history is a curious blend of the historical specialist who explores the recondite byways of history, and the romantic poet who abandons actuality altogether. He seeks his heroes in remote sequestered corners of the world,—Sardinia, Juliers, Lebanon; but actual historic research gradually yields ground to a free invention which, however, always simulates historic truth. *King Victor and King Charles* contains far less poetry than *Paracelsus*, but it was the fruit of historic studies no less severe. There was material for genuine tragedy in the story. The old king, who after fifty years of despotic rule shifts the crown to the head of his son with the intention of still pulling the wires behind the scenes, but, finding that Charles means to rule as well as reign, clutches angrily at his surrendered crown,—this

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[1] Orr, *Life*, p. 103.

King Victor has something in him of Lear, something of the dying Henry IV. But history provided more sober issues, and Browning's temperament habitually inclined him to stave off the violence of tragic passion which disturbs the subtle eddyings of thought and feeling. Charles is no Regan, hardly even an Albany, no weakling either, but a man of sensitive conscience, who shifts and gyrates responsively to the complex play of motive which Browning brings to bear upon him. Reluctantly he orders Victor's arrest, and when the old man, baffled and exasperated, is brought before him and imperiously demands the crown, he puts it upon his father's head. Neither character is drawn with the power of Strafford, but the play is largely built upon the same contrasts between personal devotion and political expediency, the untutored idealism of youth and the ruses or rigidity of age. This was a type of dramatic action which Browning imagined with peculiar power and insight, for it bodied forth a contrast between contending elements of his own nature. Towards this type all his drama tended to gravitate. In *The Return of the Druses* Browning's native bent can be more freely studied, for history has contributed only the general situation. His turn for curious and far-fetched incident is nowhere better illustrated than in this tangled intrigue carried on between Frankish Hospitallers, Venetians, and Druses of Lebanon in a lonely island of the Ægean where none of the three are at home. A political revolution—the revolt of the Druses against their Frankish lords—provides the outer momentum of the action; but the central interest is concentrated upon a "Soul's tragedy," in which the conflict of races goes on within the perplexed and paralysed bosom of a single man. Djabal, the Druse patriot brought up in Brittany, analyses his own character with the merciless self-consciousness of Browning himself:

> "I with my Arab instinct—thwarted ever
> By my Frank policy, and with in turn
> My Frank brain thwarted by my Arab heart—
> While these remained in equipoise, I lived—
> Nothing; had either been predominant,
> As a Frank schemer or an Arab mystic
> I had been something."

The conflict between policy and devotion is now transferred to the arena of a single breast, where its nature is somewhat too clearly understood and formulated. The "Frank schemer" conceives the plan of turning the Druse superstition to account by posing as an incarnation of their Founder. But the "Arab mystic" is too near sharing the belief to act his part with ease, and while he is still paltering the devoted Anael slays the Prefect. The play is thenceforth occupied, ostensibly, with the efforts of the Christian authorities to discover and punish the murderers. Its real subject is the subtle changes wrought in Djabal and Anael by their gradual transition from the relation of prophet and devotee to that of lovers. Her passion, even before he comes to share it, has begun to sap the security of his false pretensions: he longs, not at first to disavow them, but to make them true: he will be the prophetic helper of his people in very deed. To the outer world he maintains his claim with undiminished boldness and complete success; but the inner supports are gradually giving way, Arab mystic and Frank schemer lose their hold, and

> "A third and better nature rises up,
> My mere man's nature."

Anael, a simpler character than any previous woman of the plays, thus has a more significant function. Lady Carlisle fumbles blindly with the dramatic issues without essentially affecting them; Polyxena furthers them with loyal counsel, but is not their main executant. Anael, in her fervid devotion, not only precipitates the catastrophe, but emancipates her lover from the thraldom of his lower nature. In her Browning for the first time in drama represented the purifying power of Love. The transformations of soul by soul were already beginning to occupy Browning's imagination. The poet of *Cristina* and *Saul* was already foreshadowed. But nothing as yet foreshadowed the kind of spiritual influence there portrayed—that which, instead of making its way through the impact of character upon character, passion upon passion, is communicated through an unconscious glance or a song. For one who believed as fixedly as Browning in the power of these moments to change the prevailing bias of character and conduct, such a conception was full of implicit drama. A chance inspiration led him to attempt to show how a lyric soul flinging its soul-seed unconsciously forth in song might become the involuntary *deus ex machina* in the tangle of passion and plot through which she moved, resolving its problems and averting its catastrophes.

The result was a poem which Elizabeth Barrett "could find it in her heart to envy" its author, which Browning himself (in 1845) liked better than anything else he had yet done.[1] It has won a not less secure place in the affections of all who care for Browning at all. It was while walking alone in a wood near Dulwich, we are told by Mrs Orr, that "the idea flashed upon him of some one walking thus through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it; and the image shaped itself into the little silk-winder of Asolo."[2] The most important effect of this design was to call out Browning's considerable powers of rendering those gross, lurid, unspiritualised elements of the human drama upon which Pippa was to flash her transforming spell. His somewhat burly jocosity had expatiated freely in letters; but he had done nothing which, like the cynical chaff of his art students, suggests the not unskilful follower of Balzac and Dickens. And he had given no hint of the elemental tragic power shown in the great Ottima and Sebald scene, nor of the fierce and cruel sensuality, the magnificence in sin, of Ottima herself.

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[1] *Letters of R. and E. B. B.*, i. 28.

[2] Orr, *Handbook*, p. 55.

Pippa Passes, the most romantic in conception of all Browning's plays, thus first disclosed his genius for realism. *Strafford*, *King Victor*, *The Druses* are couched in the tempered ideality of blank verse; here we pass to and fro from the airiest lyric to the most massive and sinewy prose. It counted for something, too, that Italy, and above all the little hill-town in which the scene was laid, was a vivid personal memory, not a vague region of fancy like his Sardinia or Lebanon. Asolo, with its walls and turret, its bishop's palace and duomo, and girls sitting on the steps, its upland farms among the cherry orchards, its beetles sparkling along the dust, its "warm slow yellow moonlit nights" of May, and "glaring pomps" of June,—Asolo, with its legend of "Kate the queen" and her carolling page, lives as few other spots do for Browning's readers. Pippa herself, in her exquisite detachment from the sordid humanity amid which she moves, might have appeared too like a visionary presence, not of earth though on it, had she not been brought into touch, at so many points, with things that Browning had seen. *Pippa Passes* has, among Browning's dramas, the same kind of peculiar interest which belongs to the *Tempest* and to *Faust* among Shakespeare's and Goethe's. Faery and devilry were not Browning's affair; but, within the limits of his resolute humanism, *Pippa Passes* is an ideal construction, shadowing forth, under the semblance of a single definite bit of life, the controlling elements, as

Browning imagined them, in all life. For Browning, too, the world teemed with Stephanos and Trinculos, Sebastians and Antonios; it was, none the less, a magical Isle, where strange catastrophes and unsuspected revolutions sprang suddenly into being at the unseen carol of Ariel as he passed. Browning's Ariel is the organ of a spiritual power which, unlike Prospero, seeks not merely to detect and avert crime, or merely to dismiss the would-be criminal, forgiven, to "live and deal with others better," but to renovate character; to release men from the bondage of their egoisms by those influences, slight as a flower-bell or a sunset touch, which renew us by setting all our aims and desires in a new proportion.

II.

Browning's first four plays seemed to mark a growing neglect of the requirements and traditions of the stage. He might even appear to have renounced the stage altogether when in 1841 he arranged with Moxon to publish his writings in a cheap pamphlet form. The first number of *Bells and Pomegranates* contained the least theatrical of his dramas, *Pippa Passes.* "Two or three years ago" he declared in the preface (not reprinted), "I wrote a play, about which the chief matter I much care to recollect at present is that a Pit-full of good-natured people applauded it. Ever since I have been desirous of doing something in the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows I mean for the first of a series of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at intervals; and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again."

But Browning's ambition for fame as a maker of plays was still keen, and nothing but a renewed invitation to write for the stage was needed to lure him back into tentative compliance with its ways. In the course of 1841 Macready intervened with a request for another play from the author of *Strafford*.[1] Thereupon Browning produced with great rapidity *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. After prolonged and somewhat sordid green-room vicissitudes, it was performed on Feb. 11, 1843. Macready, its first begetter, did his best to wreck it; the majority of the players refused to understand their parts; but through the fine acting of Helen Faucit (Mildred) and Phelps (Lord Tresham), it achieved a moderate but brief success.

The choice of subject indicates, as has been said, a desire to make terms with stage tradition. But the ordinary theatre-goer, who went expecting to witness what the title appeared to promise, found himself, as the play proceeded, perplexed and out of his bearings. An English nobleman, with the deep-engrained family pride of his order, had suffered, or was to suffer, dishonour. But this seemingly commonplace *motif* was developed in a strange and unfamiliar ethical atmosphere—an atmosphere of moral ideas which seemed to embrace both those who upheld the feudal honour and those who "blotted" it; to hint at a purity deeper than sin. In a more sinister sense than *Colombe's Birthday*, this play might have been prefaced by the beautiful motto of its successor:—

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[1] The date is fixed by Browning's statement (Orr, p. 119).

"Ivy and violet, what do ye here
With blossom and shoot in the warm spring weather
Hiding the arms of Montecchi and Vere?"

The love of Mildred and Mertoun, which blots the Tresham 'scutcheon, is in origin as innocent as that which breaks into flower across the royal ambitions of Colombe; and their childlike purity of passion becomes, in spite of the wrong to which it has led them, the reconciling fact upon which at the close all animosities and resentments die away. The conception is genuinely tragic, for the doom which descends upon them all is a Nemesis which they have all contributed to provoke, but which none of them deserves; and which precisely the blended nobility and naïveté of Mildred and Mertoun prevents from passing by them altogether. More mature or less sensitive lovers would have found an issue from the situation as easily as an ordinary Hamlet from his task of vengeance. But Mertoun and Mildred are at once too timid and too audacious, too tremulous in their consciousness of guilt, too hardy and reckless in their mutual devotion, to carry through so difficult a game. Mertoun falters and stammers in his suit to Tresham; Mildred stands mute at her brother's charge, incapable of evasion, only resolute not to betray. Yet these same two children in the arts of politic self-defence are found recklessly courting the peril of midnight meetings in Mildred's chamber with the aid of all the approved resources and ruses of romance—the disguise, the convenient tree, the signal set in the window, the lover's serenade. And when the lover, who dared all risks to his lady and to himself for a stolen interview with her night by night, finally encounters Tresham, he is instantly paralysed, and will not even lift a sword in his own defence. Upon this union of boundless daring for one another's sake and sensibility to the shame of having wronged the house and blotted the 'scutcheon Mertoun's fate hangs, and with his Mildred's, and with hers Tresham's.

Beside the tragedy and the stain of the love of Mertoun and Mildred, Browning characteristically sets the calm, immaculate, cousinly affection of Gwendolen and Austin. One has a glimpse here of his habitual criticism of all satisfied attainment, of all easy completeness on a low plane. It is Gwendolen herself who half disarms that criticism, or makes it, as applied to her, more pathetic than trenchant by instantly detecting and proclaiming the different quality of Mertoun's love. "Mark him, Austin: that's true love! Ours must begin again." In Tresham Browning seems to have designed to portray the finest type of ancestral pride. He is "proud" of his "interminable line," because the men were all "paladins" and the women all of flawless honour; and he has the chivalrous tenderness of ideal knighthood, as well as its honourable pride. When Mertoun has received his death-stroke and told his story, the tenderness comes out; the sullied image of his passionately loved sister not only recovers its appeal, but rises up before him in mute intolerable reproach; and Mildred has scarcely breathed her last in his arms when Tresham succumbs to the poison he has taken in remorse for his hasty act. It is unlucky that this tragic climax, finely conceived as it is, is marred by the unconscious burlesque of his "Ah,—I had forgotten: I am dying." In such things one feels Browning's want of the unerring sureness of a great dramatist at the crucial moments of action.

Although not brilliantly successful on the boards, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* made a deep impression upon the more competent part of the audience. For Browning himself the most definite result was that Macready passed out of his life—for twenty years they never met—and that his most effective link with the stage was thus finally severed. But his more distant and casual relations with it were partly balanced by the much enlarged understanding of dramatic effect which he had by this time won; and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was followed by a drama which attains a beauty and charm not far below that of *Pippa Passes* under the conditions of a regular dramatic plot. The ostensible subject of *Colombe's Birthday* is a political crisis on the familiar lines;—an imperilled throne in the centre of interest, a background of vague oppression and revolt. But as compared with *King Victor* or *The Druses* the dispute is harmless, the tumult of revolution easily overheard. The diplomatic business is not etherealised into romance, like the ladies' embassy in *Love's Labour's Lost;* but neither is it allowed to become grave or menacing. Berthold's arrival to present his claim to the government of this miniature state affects us somewhat like the appearance of a new and formidable player in some drawing-room diversion; and the "treason" of the courtiers like the "unfairness" of children at play. Nevertheless, the victory of love over political interest which the motto foreshadows is not accomplished without those subtle fluctuations and surprises which habitually mark the conduct of Browning's plots. The alternative issues gain in seriousness and ideality as we proceed, and Browning has nowhere expressed the ideal of sovereignty more finely than it is expressed in this play, by the man for whose sake a sovereign is about to surrender her crown.[1] Colombe herself is one of Browning's most gracious and winning figures. She brings the ripe decision of womanhood to bear upon a series of difficult situations without losing the bright glamour of her youth. Her inborn truth and nature draw her on as by a quiet momentum, and gradually liberate her from the sway of the hollow fictions among which her lot is cast. Valence, the outward instrument of this liberation, is not the least noble of that line of chivalrous lovers which reaches from Gismond to Caponsacchi. With great delicacy the steps are marked in this inward and spiritual "flight" of Colombe. Valence's "way of love" is to make her realise the glory and privileges of the rulership which places her beyond his reach, at the very moment when she is about to resign it in despair. She discovers the needs of the woman and the possibilities of power at the same time, and thus is brought, by Valence's means, to a mood in which Prince Berthold's offer of his hand and crown together weighs formidably, for a moment, against Valence's offer of his love alone, until she discovers that Berthold is the very personation, in love and in statecraft alike, of the fictions from which she had escaped. Then, swiftly recovering herself, she sets foot finally on the firm ground where she had first sought her "true resource."

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[1] This fine speech of Valence to the greater glory of his rival (Act iv.) is almost too subtle for the stage. Browning with good reason directed its omission unless "a very good Valence" could be found.

Berthold, like Blougram, Ogniben, and many another of Browning's mundane personages, is a subtler piece of psychology than men of the type of Valence, in whom his own idealism flows freely forth. He comes before us with a weary nonchalance admirably contrasted with the fiery intensity of Valence. He means to be emperor one day, and his whole life is a process of which that is to be the product; but he finds the process unaffectedly boring. Without relaxing a whit in the mechanical pursuit of his end, he views life with much mental detachment, and shows a cool and not unsympathetic observation of men who pursue other ideals, as well as an abundance of critical irony towards those who apparently share his own. An adept in courtly arts, and owing all his successes to courtly favour, he meets the assiduities of other courtiers with open contempt. His ends are those of Laertes or Fortinbras, and he is quite capable of the methods of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; but he regards ends and methods alike with the sated distaste of Hamlet. By birth and principle a man of action, he has, even more than most of Browning's men of action, the curious introspectiveness of the philosophic onlooker. He "watches his mind," and if he does not escape illusions, recognises and exposes them with ironical candour. Few of Browning's less right-minded persons attain final insight at less cost to dramatic propriety than Berthold when he pronounces his final verdict:—

"All is for the best.
Too costly a flower were this, I see it now,
To pluck and set upon my barren helm
To wither,—any garish plume will do."

Colombe's Birthday was published in 1844 as No. 6 of the *Bells*, but had for the present no prospect of the stage. Nine years later, however, the loyal Phelps, who had so doughtily come to the rescue of its predecessor, put it successfully on the boards of his theatre at Sadler's Wells.

The most buoyant of optimists has moments of self-mockery, and the hardiest believer in ideal truth moods in which poetry seems the phantom and prose the fact. Such a mood had its share in colouring the dramatic sketch which, it is now pretty evident, Browning wrote not long after finishing *Colombe's Birthday*.[1] That play is a beautiful triumph of poetry over prose, of soul and heart over calculation and business. *A Soul's Tragedy* exhibits the inverse process: the triumph of mundane policy and genial *savoir faire* in the person of Ogniben over the sickly and equivocal "poetry" of Chiappino. Browning seems to have thrown off this bitter parody of his own idealisms in a mood like that in which Ibsen conceived the poor blundering idealist of the *Wild Duck*. Chiappino is Browning's Werle; the reverse side of a type which he had drawn with so much indulgence in the Luigi of *Pippa Passes*. Plainly, it was a passing mood; as plainly, a mood which, from the high and luminous vantage-ground of 1846, he could look back upon with regret, almost with scorn. His intercourse with Elizabeth Barrett was far advanced before she was at length reluctantly allowed to see it. "For *The Soul's*

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[1] Browning's letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Feb. 13, 1846, which does not seem to have been adequately noticed. The piece is ignored by Mrs Orr. He speaks of suspending the publication of the "unlucky play" until a second edition of the *Bells*—an "apparition" which Moxon, he says, seems to think possible; and then inserting it before *Luria:* it will then be "in its place, for it was written two or three years ago." In other words, *The Soul's Tragedy* was written in 1843-44, between *Colombe's Birthday* and *Luria*.

Tragedy," he wrote (Feb. 11)—"that will surprise you, I think. There is no trace of you there,—you have not put out the black face of *it*—it is all sneering and disillusion—and shall not be printed but burned if you say the word." This word his correspondent, needless to add, did not say; on the contrary, she found it even more impressive than its successor *Luria*. This was, however, no tribute to its stage qualities; for in hardly one of his plays is the stage more openly ignored. The dramatic form, though still preserved, sets strongly towards monologue: the entire second act foreshadows unmistakably the great portrait studies of *Men and Women;* it might be called *Ogniben* with about as good right as they are called *Lippo Lippi* or *Blougram;* the personality of the supple ecclesiastic floods and takes possession of the entire scene; we see the situation and the persons through the brilliant ironic mirror of his mind. The Chiappino of the second act is Ogniben's Chiappino, as Gigadibs is Blougram's Gigadibs. His "tragedy" is one in which there is no room for terror or pity, only for contempt. All real stress of circumstance is excluded. Both sides fight with blunted weapons; the revolt is like one of those Florentine risings which the Brownings later witnessed with amusement from the windows of Casa Guidi, which were liable to postponement because of rain. The prefect who is "assassinated" does not die, and the rebellious city is genially bantered into submission. The "soul" of Chiappino is, in fact, not the stuff of which tragedy is made. Even in his instant acceptance of Luitolfo's bloodstained cloak when the pursuers are, as he thinks, at the door, he seems to have been casually switched off the proper lines of his character into a piece of heroism which properly belongs to the man he would like to be thought, but has not the strength to be. On the whole, Browning's scorn must be considered to have injured his art. Tragedy, in the deepest sense, lay beyond his sphere; and this "tragedy" of mere degeneration and helpless collapse left untouched all the springs from which his poetry drew its life.

In the autumn of 1844 Browning made a second tour to Italy. It was chiefly memorable for his meeting, at Leghorn, with Edward John Trelawney, to whom he carried a letter of introduction;—one who had not only himself "seen Shelley plain," but has contributed more than any one else, save Hogg, to flash the unfading image of what he saw on the eyes of posterity. The journey quickened and enriched his Italian memories; and left many vivid traces in the poetry of the following year. Among these was the drama of *Luria*, ultimately published as the concluding number of the *Bells*.

In this remarkable drama Browning turned once more to the type of historical tragedy which he had originally essayed in *Strafford*. The fall of a man of passionate fidelity through the treachery of the prince or the people in whom he has put his trust, was for Browning one of the most arresting of the great traditional motives of tragic drama. He dwelt with emphasis upon this aspect of the fate of Charles's great minister; in *Luria*, where he was working uncontrolled by historical authority, it is the fundamental theme. At the same time the effect is heightened by those race contrasts which had been so abundantly used in *The Return of the Druses*. Luria is a Moor who has undertaken the service of Florence, and whose religion it is to serve her. Like Othello,[1] he has been intrusted, alien as he is, by a jealous and exacting State, with the supreme command of her military forces, a position in which the fervour of the Oriental and the frank simplicity of the soldier inevitably lie open to the subtle strategy of Italians and statesmen. "Luria," wrote Browning, while the whole scheme was "all in my brain yet, . . . devotes himself to something he thinks Florence, and the old fortune follows, . . . and I will soon loosen my Braccio and Puccio (a pale discontented man) and Tiburzio (the Pisan, good true fellow, this one), and Domizia the lady—loosen all these on dear foolish (ravishing must his folly be) golden-hearted Luria, all these with their worldly wisdom and Tuscan shrewd ways." Florence, in short, plays collectively somewhat the part of Iago to this second Othello, but of an Iago (need it be said) immeasurably less deeply rooted in malignity than Shakespeare's. It was a source of weakness as well as of strength in Browning as a dramatist that the evil things in men dissolve so readily under his scrutiny as if they were mere shells of flimsy disguise for the "soul of goodness" they contain. He has, in fact, put so much strong sense on the side of the jealous Florentine masters of his hero that his own sympathies were divided, with paralysing effect, it would seem, upon his interest in drama.[1] Even the formidable antagonism of Braccio, the Florentine Commissary, is buttressed, if not based, upon a resolve to defend the rights of civilisation against militarism, of intellect against brute force. "Brute force shall not rule Florence." Even so, it is only after conflict and fluctuation that he decides to allow Luria's trial to take its course. Puccio, again, the former general of Florence, superseded by Luria, and now serving under his command, turns out not quite the "pale discontented man" whom Browning originally designed and whom such a situation was no doubt calculated to produce. Instead of a Cassius, enviously scowling at the greatness of his former comrade, Cæsar, we have one whose generous admiration for the alien set over him struggles hard, and not unsuccessfully, with natural resentment. In keeping with such company is the noble Pisan general, who vies with Luria in generosity and twice intervenes decisively to save him from the Florentine attack. Even Domizia, the

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[1] Browning himself uses this parallel in almost his first reference to *Luria* while still unwritten: *Letters of R. B. and E. B. B.*, i. 26.

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[1] "For me, the misfortune is, I sympathise just as much with these as with him,—so there can no good come of keeping this wild company any longer."—Feb. 26, 1845.

"panther" lady who comes to the camp burning for vengeance upon Florence for the death of her kinsmen, and hoping to attain it by embroiling him with the city, finally emerges as his lover. But in Domizia he confessedly failed. The correspondence with Miss Barrett stole the vitality from all mere imaginary women; "the panther would not be tamed." Her hatred and her love alike merely beat the air. With all her volubility, she is almost as little in place in the economy of the drama as in that of the camp; her "wild mass of rage" has the air of being a valued property which she manages and exhibits, not an impelling and consuming fire. The more potent passion of Luria and his lieutenant Husain is more adequately rendered, though "the simple Moorish instinct" in them is made to accomplish startling feats in European subtlety. The East with its gift of "feeling" comes once more, as in the *Druses*, into tragic contact with the North and its gift of "thought"; but it is to the feeling East and not to thinking North that we owe the clear analysis and exposition of the contrast. Luria has indeed, like Djabal, assimilated just so much of European culture as makes its infusion fatal to him: he suffers the doom of the lesser race

> "Which when it apes the greater is forgone."

But the noblest quality of the lesser race flashes forth at the close when he takes his life, not in defiance, nor in despair, but as a last act of passionate fidelity to

Florence. This is conceived with a refinement of moral imagination too subtle perhaps for appreciation on the stage; but of the tragic power and pathos of the conception there can be no question. Mrs Browning, whose eager interest accompanied this drama through every stage of its progress, justly dwelt upon its "grandeur." The busy exuberance of Browning's thinking was not favourable to effects which multiplicity of detail tends to destroy; but the fate of this son of the "lone and silent East," though utterly un-Shakespearean in motive, recalls, more nearly than anything else in Browning's dramas, the heroic tragedy of Shakespeare.

III.

"Mere escapes of my inner power, like the light of a revolving lighthouse leaping out at intervals from a narrow chink;" so wrote Browning in effect to Miss Barrett (Feb. 11, 1845) of the "scenes and song-scraps," of which the first instalment had appeared three years before as the *Dramatic Lyrics*. Yet it is just by the intermittent flashes that the lighthouse is identified; and Browning's genius, as we have seen, was in the end to be most truly denoted by these "mere escapes." With a few notable exceptions, they offer little to the student of Browning's ideology; they do not illustrate his theories of life, they disclose no good in evil and no hope in ill-success. But they are full of an exuberant joy in life itself, as seen by a keen observer exempt from its harsher conditions, to whom all power and passion are a feast. He watches the angers, the malignities of men and women, as one might watch the quarrels of wild beasts, not cynically, but with the detached, as it were professional, interest of a born "fighter." The loftier hatred, which is a form of love, —the sublime hatred of a Dante, the tragic hatred of a Timon, even the unforgetting, self-consuming hatred of a Heathcliff,—did not now, or ever, engage his imagination. The indignant invective against a political renegade, "Just for a handful of silver he left us," in which Browning spoke his own mind, is poor and uncharacteristic compared with pieces in which he stood aside and let some accomplished devil, like the Duke in *My last Duchess*, some clerical libertine, like the bishop of St Praxed's, some sneaking reptile, like the Spanish friar, some tiger-hearted Regan, like the lady of *The Laboratory*, or some poor crushed and writhing worm, like the girl of *The Confessional*, utter their callous cynicism or their deathbed torment, the snarl of petty spite, the low fierce cry of triumphant malice, the long-drawn shriek of futile rage. There was commonly an element of unreason, extravagance, even grotesqueness, in the hatreds that caught his eye; he had a relish for the gratuitous savagery of the lady in *Time's Revenges*, who would calmly decree that her lover should be burnt in a slow fire "if that would compass her desire." He seized the grotesque side of persecution; and it is not fanciful to see in the delightful chronicle of the Nemesis inflicted upon "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" a foretaste of the sardonic confessions of *Instans Tyrannus.* And he seized the element of sheer physical zest in even eager and impassioned action; the tramp of the march, the swing of the gallop in the fiery Cavalier Tunes, the crash of Gismond's "back-handed blow" upon Gauthier's mouth; the exultant lift of the "great pace" of the riders who bring the Good News.

Of love poetry, on the other hand, there was little in these first Lyrics and Romances. Browning had had warm friendships with women, and was singularly attractive to them; but at thirty-three love had at most sent a dancing ripple across the bright surface of his life, and it apparently counted for nothing in his dreams. His plans, as he told Miss Barrett, had been made without any thought of "finding such a one as you." That discovery introduced a new and unknown factor into his scheme of things. The love-poetry of the Dramatic Lyrics and Romances is still somewhat tentative and insecure. The beautiful fantasia *In a Gondola* was directly inspired by a picture of his friend Maclise. He paints the romance of the lover's twilight tryst with all his incisive vigour; but his own pulse beats rather with the lover who goes forth at daybreak, and feels the kindling summons of the morning glory of sea and sunlight into the "world of men." His attitude to women is touched with the virginal reserve of the young Hippolytus, whose tragic fate he had told in the lofty *Prologue* of Artemis. He approaches them with a kind of delicate and distant awe; tender, even chivalrous, but accentuating rather the reserves and reticences of chivalry than its rewards. The lady of *The Flower's Name* is beautiful, but her beauty is only shyly hinted; we see no feature of face or form; only the fold of her dress brushing against the box border, the "twinkling" of her white fingers among the dark leaves. The typical lover of these lyrics is of a temperament in which feminine sensitiveness and masculine tenacity are characteristically blended; a temperament which the faintest and most fugitive signs of love—a word, a glance, the impalpable music of a romantic name—not only kindle and subdue, but permanently fortify and secure. *Cristina*, *Rudel*, and the *Lost Mistress* stand in a line of development which culminates in *The Last Ride Together*. Cristina's lover has but "changed eyes" with her; but no queenly scorn of hers can undo the spiritual transformation which her glance has wrought:

> "Her soul's mine; and thus, grown perfect,
> I shall pass my life's remainder."

The *Lost Mistress* is an exquisitely tender and pathetic farewell, but not the stifled cry of a man who has received a crushing blow. Not easily, but yet without any ruinous convulsion, he makes that transition from love to "mere friendship" which passionate men so hardly endure.

The really tragic love-story was, for Browning, the story not of love rejected but of love flagging, fading, or crushed out.

"Never fear, but there's provision
Of the devil's to quench knowledge
Lest on earth we walk in rapture,"

Cristina's lover had bitterly reflected. Courts, as the focuses of social artifice and ceremonial restraint, were for him the peculiar breeding-places of such tragedies, and in several of the most incisive of the Lyrics and Romances he appears as the champion of the love they menace. The hapless *Last Duchess* suffers for the largess of her kindly smiles. The duchess of *The Flight* and the lady of *The Glove* successfully revolt against pretentious substitutes for love offered in love's name. *The Flight* is a tale, as Mrs Browning said, "with a great heart in it." Both the Gipsy-woman whose impassioned pleading we overhear, and the old Huntsman who reports it, are drawn from a domain of rough and simple humanity not very often trodden by Browning. The genial retainer admirably mediates between the forces of the Court which he serves and those of the wild primitive race to which his world-old calling as a hunter makes him kin; his hearty, untutored speech and character envelop the story like an atmosphere, and create a presumption that heart and nature will ultimately have their way. Even the hinted landscape-background serves as a mute chorus. In this "great wild country" of wide forests and pine-clad mountains, the court is the anomaly.

Similarly, in *The Glove*, the lion, so magnificently sketched by Browning, is made to bear out the inner expressiveness of the tale in a way anticipated by no previous teller. The lion of Schiller's ballad is already assuaged to his circumstances, and enters the arena like a courtier entering a drawing-room. Browning's lion, still terrible and full of the tameless passion for freedom, bursts in with flashing forehead, like the spirit of the desert of which he dreams: it is the irruption of this mighty embodiment of elemental Nature which wakens in the lady the train of feeling and thought that impel her daring vindication of its claims.

Art was far from being as strange to the Browning of 1842-45 as love. But he seized with a peculiar predilection those types and phases of the Art-world with which love has least to do. He studies the egoisms of artists, the vanities of connoisseurs; the painter Lutwyche showing "how he can hate"; the bishop of St Praxed's piteously bargaining on his death-bed for the jasper and lapislazuli "which Gandolph shall not choose but see and burst"; the duke of the *Last Duchess* displaying his wife's portrait as the wonder of his gallery, and unconcernedly disposing of her person. In a single poem only Browning touches those problems of the artist life which were to occupy him in the 'Fifties; and the *Pictor Ignotus* is as far behind the *Andrea del*

Sarto and *Fra Lippo Lippi* in intellectual force as in dramatic brilliance and plasticity. Browning's sanguine and energetic temperament always inclined him to over-emphasis, and he has somewhat over-emphasised the anæmia of this anæmic soul. Rarely again did he paint in such resolute uniformity of ashen grey. The "Pictor" is the earliest, and the palest, of Browning's pale ascetics, who make, in one way or another, the great refusal, and lose their souls by trying to save them in a barrenness which they call purity.

The musician as such holds at this stage an even smaller place in Browning's art than the painter. None of these Lyrics foreshadows *Abt Vogler* and *Hugues of Saxe-Gotha* as the *Pictor* foreshadows *Lippi* and *Del Sarto.* But if he did not as yet explore the ways of the musical soul, he shows already a peculiar instinct for the poetic uses and capabilities of music. He sings with peculiar *entrain* of the transforming magic of song. The thrush and cuckoo, among the throng of singing-birds, attract him by their musicianly qualities — the "careless rapture" repeated, the "minor third" *which only the cuckoo knows.* These Lyrics and Romances of 1842-45 are as full of tributes to the power of music as *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* themselves. Orpheus, whose story Milton there touched so ravishingly, was too trite an instance to arrest Browning; it needed perhaps the stimulus of his friend Leighton's picture to call forth, long afterwards, the few choice verses on Eurydice. More to his mind was the legend of that motley Orpheus of the North, the Hamelin piper,—itself a picturesque motley of laughter and tears. The Gipsy's lay of far-off romance awakens the young duchess; Theocrite's "little human praise" wins God's ear, and Pippa's songs transform the hearts of men. A poet in this vein would fall naturally enough upon the Biblical story of the cure of the stricken Saul by the songs of the boy David. But a special influence drew Browning to this subject,—the wonderful *Song to David* of Christopher Smart,—"a person of importance in his day," who owes it chiefly to Browning's enthusiastic advocacy of a poem he was never weary of declaiming, that he is a poet of importance in ours. Smart's David is before all things the glowing singer of the Joy of Earth,—the glory of the visible creation uttering itself in rapturous Praise of the Lord. And it is this David of whom we have a presentiment in the no less glowing songs with which Browning's shepherd-boy seeks to reach the darkened mind of Saul.

Of the poem we now possess, only the first nine sections belong to the present phase of Browning's work. These were confessedly incomplete, but Browning was content to let them go forth as they were, and less bent upon even their ultimate completion, it would seem, than Miss Barrett, who bade him "remember" that the poem was "there only as a first part, and that the next parts must certainly follow and complete what will be a great lyrical work—now remember."[1] And the "next parts" when they came, in *Men and Women*, bore the mark of his ten years' fellowship with her devout and ecstatic soul, as well as of his own growth towards the richer and fuller harmonies of verse. The 1845 fragment falls, of course, far short of its sequel in imaginative audacity and splendour, but it is steeped in a pellucid beauty which Browning's busy intellectuality was too prone to dissipate. Kenyon read it nightly, as he told Mrs Browning, "to put his dreams in order"; finely comparing it to "Homer's Shield of Achilles, thrown into lyrical whirl and life." And certainly, if Browning anywhere approaches that Greek plasticity for which he cared so little, it is in these exquisitely sculptured yet breathing scenes. Then, as the young singer kindles to his work, his song, without becoming less transparent, grows more personal and impassioned; he no longer repeats the familiar chants of his tribe, but breaks into a new impetuous inspiration of his own; the lyrical whirl and life gathers swiftness and energy, and the delicate bas-reliefs of Saul's people, in their secular pieties of grief or joy, merge in the ecstatic vision of Saul himself, as he had once been, and as he might yet be, that

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[1] *E. B. B. to R. B.*, Dec. 10, 1845.

"boyhood of wonder and hope,
Present promise and wealth of the future beyond the eye's
scope,"

all the fulness and glory of the life of humanity gathered upon his single head. It is the very voice of life, which thrills and strikes across the spiritual darkness of Saul, as the coming of Hyperion scattered the shadows of Saturnian night.

CHAPTER IV.

WEDDED LIFE IN ITALY. *MEN AND WOMEN.*

> This foot, once planted on the goal;
> This glory-garland round my soul.
> —*The Last Ride Together.*

> Warmer climes
> Give brighter plumage, stronger wing; the breeze
> Of Alpine highths thou playest with, borne on
> Beyond Sorrento and Amalfi, where
> The Siren waits thee, singing song for song.
> —LANDOR.

I.

THE *Bells and Pomegranates* made no very great way with the public, which found the matter unequal and the title obscure. But both the title and the greater part of the single poems are linked inseparably with the most intimate personal relationship of his life. Hardly one of the Romances, as we saw, but had been read in MS. by Elizabeth Barrett, and pronounced upon with the frank yet critical delight of her nature. In the abstruse symbolic title, too, — implying, as Browning expected his readers to discover, "sound and sense" or "music and discoursing,"—her wit had divined a more felicitous application to Browning's poetry—

> "Some 'Pomegranate,' which, if cut deep down the middle,
> Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity."

The two poets were still strangers when this was written; but each had for years recognised in the other a new and wonderful poetic force,[1] and the vivid words marked the profound community of spirit which was finally to draw them together. A few years later, a basket of pomegranates was handed to her, when travelling with her husband in France, and she laughingly accepted the omen. The omen was fulfilled; Elizabeth Browning's poetry expanded and matured in the companionship of that rich-veined human heart; it was assuredly not by chance that Browning, ten years after her death, recalled her symbol in the name of his glorious woman-poet, Balaustion.

But she, on her part, also brought a new and potent influence to bear upon his poetry, the only one which after early manhood he ever experienced; and their union was by far the most signal event in Browning's intellectual history, as it was in his life. Her experience up to the time when they met had been in most points singularly unlike his own. Though of somewhat higher social status, she had seen far less of society and of the world; but she had gone through the agony of a passionately loved brother's sudden death, and the glory of English wood and meadow was for her chiefly, as to Milton in his age, an enchanted memory of earlier days, romantically illuminating a darkened London chamber. "Most of my events, and nearly all my intense pleasures," she said to Horne, "have passed in my thoughts." Both were eager students, and merited the hazardous reputation which both incurred, of being "learned poets"; but Browning wore his learning, not indeed "lightly, like a flower," but with the cool mastery of a scholarly man of the world, whose interpretation of books is controlled at every point by his knowledge of men; while Miss Barrett's Greek and Hebrew chiefly served to allure an imagination naturally ecstatic and visionary along paths crowded with congenial unearthly symbols, with sublime shapes of gods and Titans, angels and seraphim. Then, notwithstanding the *rôle* of hopeless invalid which she was made to play, and did play with touching conviction, she had, it is clear, a fund of buoyant and impulsive vitality hardly inferior to Browning's own; only that the energy which in him flowed out through natural channels had in her to create its own opportunities, and surged forth with harsh or startling violence,—sometimes "tearing open a parcel instead of untying it," and sometimes compelling words to serve her will by masterful audacities of collocation.

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[1] She had at once discerned the "new voice" in *Paracelsus*, 1835; and the occasion may have been not much later ("years ago" in 1845) on which he was all but admitted to the "shrine" of the "world's wonder" (*R. B. to E. B. B.*, Jan. 10, 1845).

Both poets stood apart from most of their contemporaries by a certain exuberance—"a fine excess"—quite foreign to the instincts of a generation which repudiated the Revolution and did its best to repudiate Byron. But Browning's exuberance was genial, hearty, and on occasion brutal; hers was exalted, impulsive, "headlong,"[1] intense, and often fantastic and quaint. His imagination flamed forth like an intenser sunlight, heightening and quickening all that was alive and alert in man and Nature; hers shot out superb or lurid volcanic gleams across the simplicity of natural chiaro-oscuro, disturbing the air with conflicting and incalculable effects of strange horror and strange loveliness. It might have been averred of Browning that he said everything he thought; of her the truer formula would be her own, that she "took every means of saying" what she thought.[2] There was something of Æschylus in her, as there was much of Aristophanes in him; it was not for nothing that her girlish ardour had twice flung itself upon the task of rendering the *Prometheus Bound* in English; they met on common ground in the human and pathetic Euripides. But her power was lyric, not dramatic. She sang from the depths of a wonderfully rich and passionate nature; while he was most truly himself when he was personating some imaginary mind.

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[1] The word her Italian tutor meant to describe her by, but could not pronounce it. He said she was *testa lunga* (*Letters of R. and E. B.*, i. 7).

[2] *Letters*, *R. and E. B.*, i. 8. Cf. her admirable letter to Ruskin, ten years later, apropos of the charge of "affectation." "To say a thing faintly, because saying it strongly sounds odd or obscure or unattractive for some reason to careless readers, does appear to me bad policy as well as bad art" (*Letters of E. B. B.*, ii., 200).

Early in January 1845 the two poets were brought by the genial Kenyon, her cousin and his good friend, into actual communication, and the memorable correspondence, the most famous of its kind in English literature, at once began. Browning, as his way was in telling other men's stories, burst at once *in medias res* in this great story of his own. "I love your verses, my dear Miss Barrett, with all my heart," he assures her in the first sentence of his first letter. He feels them already too much a part of himself to ever "try and find fault,"—"nothing comes of it all,—so into me has it gone and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew." It was "living," like his own; it was also direct, as his own was not. His frank *camaraderie* was touched from the outset with a fervent, wondering admiration to which he was by no means prone. "You *do*, what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem likely now to do for the first time. You speak out, *you*,—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, *but I am going to try*." Thus the first contact with the "Lyric Love" of after days set vibrating the chords of all that was lyric and personal in Browning's nature. His brilliant virtuosity in the personation of other minds threatened to check all simple utterance of his own. The "First Poem" of Robert Browning had yet to be written, but now, as soon as he had broken from his "dancing ring of men and women,"—the Dramatic Lyrics and Romances and one or two outstanding dramas,—he meant to write it. Miss Barrett herself hardly understood until much later the effect that her personality, the very soul that spoke in her poetry, had upon her correspondent. She revelled in the Dramatic Lyrics and Romances, and not least in rollicking pieces, like *Sibrandus* or *The Spanish Cloister*, which appealed to the robust masculine humour with which this outwardly fragile woman is too rarely credited. *Pippa Passes* she could find in her heart to covet the authorship of, more than any of his other works—a preference in which he agreed. Few more brilliant appreciations of English poetry are extant than some of those which sped during 1845 and 1846 from the invalid chamber in Harley Street to the "old room" looking out on the garden at New Cross. But she did not conceal from him that she wished him to seek "the other crown" also. "I do not think, with all that music in you, only your own personality should be dumb."[1] But she undoubtedly, with all her sense of the glory of the dramatic art, discouraged his writing for the stage, a domain which she regarded with an animus curiously compounded of Puritan loathing, poetic scorn, and well-bred shrinking from the vulgarity of the green-room. And it is clear that before the last plays, *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy*, were published his old stage ambition had entirely vanished. It was not altogether hyperbole (in any case the hyperbole was wholly unconscious) when he spoke of her as a new medium to which his sight was gradually becoming adjusted, "*seeing all things, as it does, in you.*"

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[1] *E. B. B to R. B.*, 26th May 1846. Cf. *R. B.*, 13th Feb. 1846.

She, on her part, united, as clever women in love so often do, with a woman's more utter self-abasement a larger measure of critical penetration. The "poor tired wandering singer," who so humbly took the hand of the liberal and princely giver, and who with perfect sincerity applied to herself his unconscious phrase—

> "Cloth of frieze, be not too bold
> Though thou'rt match'd with cloth of gold,"

"That, beloved, was written for me!"[1]—shows at the same time the keenest insight into the qualities of his work. She felt in him the masculine temper and the masculine range, his singular union of rough and even burly power with subtle intellect and penetrating music. With the world of society and affairs she had other channels of communication. But no one of her other friends—not *Orion* Horne, not even Kenyon—bridged as Browning did the gulf between the world of society and affairs, which she vaguely knew, and the romantic world of poetry in which she lived. If she quickened the need for lyrical utterance in him, he drew her, in his turn, into a closer and richer contact with common things. If she had her part in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, he had his, no less, in *Aurora Leigh.*

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[1] *E. B. B. to R. B.*, 9th Jan. 1846.

Twenty-one months passed between Browning's first letter and their marriage. The tentative exchange of letters passed into a formal "contract" to correspond,—sudden if not as "unadvised" as the love-vows of Juliet, a parallel which he shyly hinted, and she, with the security of the whole-hearted, boldly recalled. All the winter and early spring her health forbade a meeting, and it is clear that but for the quiet pressure of his will they never would have met. But with May came renewed vigour, and she reluctantly consented to a visit. "He has a way of putting things which I have not, a way of putting aside,—so he came." A few weeks later he spoke. She at first absolutely refused to entertain the thought; he believed, and was silent. But in the meantime the letters and the visits "rained down more and more," and the fire glowed under the surface of the writing and the talk, subdued but unsuppressed. Once more his power of "putting aside" compelled her to listen, and when she listened she found herself assailed at a point which her own exalted spirituality made her least able to defend, by a love more utterly self-sacrificing than even she had ever imagined. This man of the masterful will, who took no refusals, might perhaps in any case have finally "put aside" all obstacles to her consent. But when he disclosed—to her amazement, well as she thought she knew him—that he had asked the right to love her without claiming any love in return, that when he first spoke he had believed her disease to be incurable, and yet preferred to be allowed to sit only a day at her side to the fulfilment of "the brightest dream which should exclude her," her resistance gave way,—and little by little, in her own beautiful words, she was drawn into the persuasion that something was left, and that she could still do something for the happiness of another. In another sense than she intended in the great opening sonnet "from the Portuguese," Love, undreamt of, had come to her with the irresistible might of Death, and called her back into life by rekindling in her the languishing, almost extinguished, desire to live. Is it hyperbole to be reminded of that other world-famous rescue from death which Browning, twenty-five years later, was to tell with such infinite verve? Browning did not need to imagine, but only to remember, the magnificent and audacious vitality of his Herakles; he had brought back his own "espoused saint," like Alcestis, from the grave.

But the life thus gained was, in the immediate future, full of problems. Browning, said Kenyon, was "great in everything"; and during the year which followed their engagement he had occasion to exhibit the capacities both of the financier he had once declined to be, and of the diplomatist he was willing to become. Love had flung upon his life, as upon hers, a sudden splendour for which he was in no way prepared. "My whole scheme of life," he wrote to her,[1] "(with its wants, material wants at least, closely cut down), was long ago calculated—and it supposed *you*, the finding such an one as you, utterly impossible." But his schemes for a profession and an income were summarily cut short. Elizabeth Barrett peremptorily declined to countenance any such sacrifice of the work he was called to for any other. The same deep sense of what was due to him, and to his wife, sustained her through the trial that remained, — from the apparent degradation of secrecy and subterfuge which the domestic policy of Mr Barrett made inevitable, to the mere physical and nervous strain of rising, that September morning of 1846, from an invalid's couch to be married. That "peculiarity," as she gently termed it, of her father's, malign and cruel as it was, twice precipitated a happy crisis in their fortunes, which prudence might have postponed. His refusal to allow her to seek health in Italy in Oct. 1845 had brought them definitely together; his second refusal in Aug. 1846 drove her to the one alternative of going there as Browning's wife. A week after the marriage ceremony, during which they never met, Mrs Browning left her home, with the faithful Wilson and the indispensable Flush, *en route* for Southampton. The following day they arrived in Paris.

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[1] *R. B. to E. B. B.*, Sept. 13, 1845.

II.

There followed fifteen years during which the inexhaustible correspondents of the last twenty months exchanged no further letter, for they were never parted. That is the sufficient outward symbol of their all but flawless union. After a leisurely journey through France, and an experimental sojourn at the goal of Mrs Browning's two frustrated journeys, Pisa, they settled towards the close of April 1847 in furnished apartments in Florence, moving some four months later into the more permanent home which their presence was to render famous, the Palazzo (or "Casa") Guidi, just off the Piazza Pitti.

Their life—mirrored for us in Mrs Browning's vivid and delightful letters—was, like many others, in which we recognise rare and precious quality, singularly wanting in obviously expressive traits. It is possible to describe everything that went on in the Browning household in terms applicable to those of scores of other persons of wide interests, cultivated tastes, and moderate but not painfully restricted means. All that was passionate, ideal, heroic in them found expression through conditions which it needs a fine eye to distinguish from those of easy-going bourgeois mediocrity. Their large and catholic humanity exempted them from much that makes for bold and sensational outline in the story of a career. Their poetic home was built upon all the philistine virtues. Mrs Jameson laughed at their "miraculous prudence and economy"; and Mrs Browning herself laughed, a little, at her husband's punctilious rigour in paying his debts,—his "horror of owing five shillings for five days"; Browning, a born virtuoso in whatever he undertook, abhorring a neglected bill as he did an easy rhyme, and all other symbols of that slovenly Bohemia which came nearest, on the whole, to his conception of absolute evil. They lived at first in much seclusion, seeking no society, and unknown alike to the Italian and the English quarters of the Florentine world. But Arcady was, at bottom, just as foreign to their ways as Bohemia. "Soundless and stirless hermits," Mrs Browning playfully called them; but in no house in Florence did the news of political and literary Europe find keener comment or response than in this quiet hermitage. Two long absences, moreover (1851-52 and 1855-56), divided between London and Paris, interrupted their Italian sojourn; and these times were crowded with friendly intercourse, which they keenly enjoyed. "No place like Paris for living in," Browning declared after returning from its blaze to the quiet retreat of Casa Guidi. But both felt no less deeply the charm of their "dream life" within these old tapestried walls.[1] Nor did either, in spite of their delight in French poetry and their vivid interest in French politics, really enter the French world. They were received by George Sand, whose "indiscreet immortalities" had ravished Elizabeth Barrett in her invalid chamber years before; but though she "felt the burning soul through all that quietness," and through the "crowds of ill-bred men who adore her *à genoux bas*, betwixt a puff of smoke and an ejection of saliva,"—they both felt that she did not care for them. Dumas, another admiration, they did not see; an introduction to Hugo, Browning carried about for years but had no chance of presenting; Béranger they saw in the street, and regretted the absence of an intermediator. Balzac, to their grief, was just dead. A complete set of his works was one of their Florentine ambitions. One memorable intimacy was formed, however, during the Paris winter of 1851-52; for it was now that he first met Joseph Milsand, his warm friend until Milsand's death in 1886, and probably, for the last twenty years at least, the most beloved of all his friends, as he was at all times one of his shrewdest yet kindliest critics. Their summer visits to London (1851, 1852, 1855, 1856) brought them much more of intimate personal converse, tempered, however, inevitably, in a yet greater proportion, by pain, discomfort, and fatigue. Of himself, yet more than of the Laureate, might have been used the phrase in which he was to dedicate a later poem to Tennyson—"noble and sincere in friendship." The visitors who gathered about him in these London visits included friends who belonged to every phase and aspect of his career—from his old master and mentor, Fox, and Kenyon, the first begetter of his wedded happiness, to Dante Rossetti, his first and, for years to come, solitary disciple, and William Allingham, whom Rossetti introduced. Among his own contemporaries they were especially intimate with Tennyson,—the sterling and masculine "Alfred" of Carlyle, whom the world first learnt to know from his biography; and with Carlyle himself, a more genial and kindly Carlyle than most others had the gift of evoking, and whom his biographers mostly efface.

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[1] *Letters of E. B. B.*, ii. 199.

After their return from the second journey to the north their Italian life lost much of its dream-like seclusion. The publication of *Men and Women* (1855) and *Aurora Leigh* (1856) drew new visitors to the salon in Casa Guidi, and after 1853 they repeatedly wintered in Rome, mingling freely in its more cosmopolitan society, and, on occasion, in the gaieties of the Carnival. To the end, however, their Roman circle was more American than English. "Is Mr Browning an American?" asked an English lady of the American ambassador. "Is it possible that you ask me that?" came the prompt and crushing retort; "why, there is not a village in the United States so small that they could not tell you that Robert Browning is an Englishman, and they wish he were an American." Spiritualism, in the main an American institution, became during the later years a centre of fervid interest to the one and an irritant to the other. One turns gladly from that episode to their noble and helpful friendship for a magnificent old dying lion, with whom, as every one else discovered, it was ill to play—Walter Savage Landor. Here it was the wife who looked on with critical though kindly sarcasm at what she thought her husband's generous excess of confidence. Of all these intimacies and relationships, however, the poetry of these years discloses hardly a glimpse. His actual dealings with men and women called out all his genial energies of heart and brain, but—with one momentous exception—they did not touch his imagination.

III.

Almost as faint as these echoes of personal friendship are those of the absorbing public interest of these years, the long agony, fitfully relieved by spells of desperate and untimely hope, of the Italian struggle for liberty. The Brownings arrived in Florence during the lull which preceded the great outbreak of 1848. From the historic "windows of Casa Guidi" they looked forth upon the gentle futilities of the Tuscan revolution, the nine days' fight for Milan, the heroic adventure of Savoy, and the apparently final collapse of all these high endeavours on the field of Novara. Ten years of petty despotism on the one side, of "a unanimity of despair" on the other, followed; and then the monotonous tragedy seemed to break suddenly into romance, as the Emperor, "deep and cold," marched his armies over the Alps for the Deliverance of Italy.

Of all this the Brownings were deeply moved spectators. Browning shared his wife's sympathy with the

Italians and her abhorrence of Austria, and it is not likely that he uttered either sentiment with less vivacity and emphasis, though much less of his talk is on record. "'How long, O Lord, how long!' Robert kept saying." But he had not her passionate admiration for France, still less her faith in the President-Emperor. His less lyric temperament did not so readily harbour unqualified emotion as hers. His judgment of character was cooler, and with all his proverbial readiness as a poet to provide men of equivocal conduct with hypothetical backgrounds of lofty or blameless motive, he was in practice as exempt from amiable illusions as he was from narrow spite. Himself the most exact and precise in his dealings with the world, he could pardon the excesses and irregularities of a great nature; but sordid self-seeking under the mask of high ideals revolted him. He laughed at the boyish freaks of Landor's magnificent old age, which irritated even his large-hearted wife; but he could not forgive Louis Napoleon the *coup d'état*, and when the liberation of Lombardy was followed by the annexation of Savoy and Nice, the Emperor's devoted defender had to listen, without the power of effective retort, to his biting summary of the situation: "It was a great action; but he has taken eighteenpence for it, which is a pity."

A dozen years later Louis Napoleon's equivocal character and career were to be subjected by Browning to a still more equivocal exposition. But this sordid trait brought him within a category of "soul" upon which Browning did not yet, in these glowing years, readily lavish his art. A poem upon Napoleon, which had occupied him much during the winter of 1859 (cf. note, p. 167 below), was abandoned. "Blougram's" splendid and genial duplicity already attracted him, but the analysis of the meretricious figure of Napoleon became a congenial problem only to that later Browning of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies who was to explore the shady souls of a Guido, a Miranda, and a Sludge. On the other hand, deeply as he felt the sorrows of Italy, it was no part of his poetic mission to sing them. The voice of a great community wakened no lyric note in him, nor did his anger on its behalf break into dithyrambs. Nationality was not an effectual motive with him. He felt as keenly as his wife, or as Shelley; but his feeling broke out in fitful allusion or sardonic jest in the *De Gustibus* or the *Old Pictures*—not in a *Casa Guidi Windows*, or *Songs before Congress*, an *Ode to Naples*, or a *Hellas*. An "Ode" containing, by his own account, fierce things about England, he destroyed after Villafranca. It is only in subtle and original variations that we faintly recognise the broad simple theme of Italy's struggle for deliverance. The *Patriot* and *Instans Tyrannus* both have a kind of nexus with the place and time; but the one is a caustic satire on popular fickleness and the other a sardonically humorous travesty of persecution. Italy is mentioned in neither.

Both are far removed from the vivid and sympathetic reflection of the national struggle which thrills us in *The Italian in England* and the third scene of *Pippa Passes.* This "tyrant" has nothing to do with the Austrian whom Luigi was so eager to assassinate, or any other: whatever in him belongs to history has been permeated through and through with the poet's derisive irony; he is despotism stripped of the passionate conviction which may lend it weight and political significance, reduced to a kind of sport, like the chase of a butterfly, and contemplating its own fantastic tricks with subdued amusement.

IV.

The great political drama enacted in Italy during the Brownings' residence there, thus scarcely stirred the deeper currents of Browning's imagination, any more than, for all the vivid and passionate eloquence she poured forth in its name, it really touched the genius of his wife. The spell of Italian scenery was less easily evaded than the abstractions of politics by a poet of his keen sensibility to light and colour. And the years of his Italian sojourn certainly left palpable traces, not only, as is obvious, upon the landscape background which glows behind his human figures, but on his way of conceiving and rendering the whole relation between Nature and Man. They did not, indeed, make him in any sense a Nature poet. In that very song of delight in "Italy, my Italy," which tells how the things he best loves in the world are

> "a castle precipice-encurled
> In a gash of the wind-grieved Apennine,"

or some old palazzo, with a pointed cypress to guard it, by the opaque blue breadth of summer sea, the joy in mountain and sea is subtly reinforced at every point by the play of human interest; there are frescoes on the crumbling walls, and a barefooted girl tumbles melons on the pavement with news that the king has been shot at; art and politics asserting their place beside Nature in the heart of Italy's "old lover." And in the actual life of the Brownings "Nature" had to be content, as a rule, with the humbler share. Their chosen abode was not a castle in the Apennines or an old crumbling house by the southern sea, but an apartment commanding the crowded streets of Florence; and their principal absences from it were spent in Rome, in London, or in the yet more congenial "blaze of Paris." They delighted certainly to escape into the forest uplands. "Robert and I go out and lose ourselves in the woods and mountains, and sit by the waterfalls on the starry and moonlit nights," she wrote from their high perch above Lucca in 1849; but their adventures in this kind were on the whole like the noon-disport of the amphibian swimmer in *Fifine*,—they always admitted of an easy retreat to the *terra firma* of civilisation,—

> "Land the solid and safe
> To welcome again (confess!)
> When, high and dry, we chafe
> The body, and don the dress."

The Nature Browning knew and loved was well within sight of humanity, and it was commonly brought nearer by some intrusive vestiges of man's work; the crescent moon drifting in the purple twilight, or "lamping" between the cypresses, is seen over Fiesole or Samminiato; the "Alpine gorge" above Lucca has its ruined chapel and its mill; the Roman Campagna has its tombs—"Rome's ghost since her decease"; the Etrurian hill-fastnesses have their crowning cities "crowded with culture." He had always had an alert eye for the elements of human suggestion in landscape. But his rendering of landscape before the Italian period was habitually that of a brilliant, graphic, but not deeply interested artist, wielding an incisive pencil and an opulent brush, fastening upon every bit of individual detail, and sometimes, as in the admirable *Englishman in Italy*, recalling Wordsworth's indignant reproof of the great fellow-artist—Scott—who "made an inventory of Nature's charms." This hard objective brilliance does not altogether disappear from the work of his Italian period. But it tends to give way to a strangely subtle interpenetration of the visible scene with the passion of the seeing soul. Nature is not more alive, but her life thrills and palpitates in subtler relation with the life of man. The author of *Men and Women* is a greater poet of Nature than the author of the *Lyrics and Romances*, because he is, also, a greater poet of "Soul"; for his larger command of soul-life embraces just those moods of spiritual passion which beget the irradiated and transfigured Nature for which, since Wordsworth, poetry has continually striven to find expression. Browning's subtler feeling for Nature sprang from his profounder insight into love. Love was his way of approach, as it was eminently not Wordsworth's, to the transfigured Nature which Wordsworth first disclosed. It is habitually lovers who have these visions,—all that was mystical in Browning's mind attaching itself, in fact, in some way to his ideas of love. To the Two in the Campagna its primeval silence grows instinct with passion, and its peace with joy,—the joy of illimitable space and freedom, alluring yet mocking the finite heart that yearns. To the lovers of the Alpine gorge the old woods, heaped and dim, that hung over their troth-plighting, mysteriously drew them together; the moment that broke down the bar between soul and soul also breaking down, as it were, the bar between man and nature:

"The forests had done it; there they stood;
  We caught for a moment the powers at play:
They had mingled us so, for once and good,
  Their work was done, we might go or stay,
They relapsed to their ancient mood."

Such "moments" were, in fact, for Browning as well as for his lovers, rare and fitful exceptions to the general nonchalance of Nature towards human affairs. The powers did good, as they did evil, "at play"; intervening with a kind of cynical or ironical detachment (like Jaques plighting Touchstone and Audrey) in an alien affair of hearts. A certain eerie playfulness is indeed a recurring trait in Browning's highly individual feeling about Nature; the uncanny playfulness of a wild creature of boundless might only half intelligible to man, which man contemplates with mingled joy, wonder, and fear. Joy, when the brown old Earth wears her good gigantic smile, on an autumn morning; wonder, when he watches the "miracles wrought in play" in the teeming life of the Campagna; fear, when, on a hot August midnight, Earth tosses stormily on her couch. And all these notes of feelings are struck, with an intensity and a boldness of invention which make it unique among his writings, in the great romantic legend of *Childe Roland.* What the *Ancient Mariner* is in the poetry of the mysterious terrors and splendours of the sea, that *Childe Roland* is in the poetry of bodeful horror, of haunted desolation, of waste and plague, ragged distortion, and rotting ugliness in landscape. The Childe, like the Mariner, advances through an atmosphere and scenery of steadily gathering menace; the "starved ignoble" Nature, "peevish and dejected" among her scrub of thistle and dock, grows malignant; to the barren waste succeed the spiteful little river with its drenched despairing willows, the blood-trampled mire and wrecked torture-engine, the poisonous herbage and palsied oak, and finally the mountains, ignoble as the plain — "mere ugly heights and heaps," ranged round the deadly den of the Dark Tower. But Browning's horror-world differs from Coleridge's in the pervading sense that the powers which control its issues are "at play." The catastrophe is not the less tragic for that; but the heroic knight is not a culprit who has provoked the vengeance of his pursuers, but a quarry whose course they follow with grim half-suppressed laughter as he speeds into the trap. The hoary cripple cannot hide his malicious glee, the "stiff blind horse" is as grotesque as he is woeful, the dreary day itself, as it sinks, shoots one grim red leer at the doomed knight as he sets forth; in the penury and inertness of the wasted plain he sees "grimace"; the mountains fight like bulls or doze like dotards; and the Dark Tower itself is "round and squat," built of brown stone, a mere anticlimax to romance; while round it lie the sportsmen assembled to see the end—

"The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay."

V.

But the scenery of Italy, with all its appeals of picturesque outline and glowing colour, interested Browning less than its painting, sculpture, and music. "Nature I loved, and after Nature, Art," Landor declared in one of his stately epitaphs on himself; Browning would, in this sense of the terms at least, have inverted their order. Casa Guidi windows commanded a view, not only of revolutionary throngs, but of the façade of the Pitti—a fact of at least equal significance. From the days of his boyish pilgrimages to the Dulwich Gallery across the Camberwell meadows, he had been an eager student and critic of painting; curious, too, if not yet expert in all the processes and technicalities of the studio. He judged pictures with the eye of a skilful draughtsman; and two rapid journeys had given him some knowledge of the Italian galleries. Continuous residence among the chief glories of the brush and chisel did not merely multiply artistic incitement and appeal; it brought the whole world of art into more vital touch with his imaginative activity. It would be hard to say that there is any definite change in his view of art, but its problems grow more alluring to him, and its images more readily waylay and capture his passing thought. The artist as such becomes a more dominant figure in his hierarchy of spiritual workers; while Browning himself betrays a new self-consciousness of his own function as an artist in verse; conceiving, for instance, his consummate address to his wife as an artist's way of solving a perplexity which only an artist could feel, that of finding unique expression for the unique love.

"He who works in fresco, steals a hair-brush,
Curbs the liberal hand, subservient proudly,
Cramps his spirit, crowds its all in little,

> Makes a strange art of an art familiar,
> Fills his lady's missal-marge with flowerets;
> He who blows thro' bronze may breathe thro' silver,
> Fitly serenade a slumbrous princess;
> He who writes may write for once, as I do."

Browning is distinguished among the poets to whom art meant much by the prominence with him of the specifically artist's point of view. He cared for pictures, or for music, certainly, as clues to the interpretation of human life, hints of "the absolute truth of things" which the sensible world veils and the senses miss. But he cared for them also, and yet more, as expressions of the artist's own "love of loving, rage of knowing, seeing, feeling" that absolute truth. And he cared for them also and not less, without regard to anything they expressed, as simple outflows of vitality, however grotesque or capricious. His own eye and ear continually provoked his hand to artistic experiments and activities. During the last years in Italy his passion for modelling even threatened to divert him from poetry; and his wife playfully lamented that the "poor lost soul" produced only casts, which he broke on completion, and no more Men and Women. And his own taste in art drew him, notoriously, to work in which the striving hand was palpable,—whether it was a triumphant *tour de force* like Cellini's Perseus, in the Loggia—their daily banquet in the early days at Florence; or the half-articulate utterances of "the Tuscan's early art," like those "Pre-Giotto pictures" which sur-rounded them in the salon of Casa Guidi, "quieting" them if they were over busy, as Mrs Browning beautifully says,[1] more perhaps in her own spirit than in her husband's.

Almost all Browning's finest poems of painting belong to these Italian years, and were enshrined in *Men and Women*. They all illustrate more or less his characteristic preoccupation with the artist's point of view, and also, what is new, the point of view of particular and historical artists,—a Guercino, an Andrea del Sarto, a Giotto, a Lippo Lippi. Even where he seems to write under the peculiar spell of his wife, as in the *Guardian Angel*, this trait asserts itself. They had spent three glowing August days of 1848 at Fano, and thrice visited the painting by Guercino there,—"to drink its beauty to our soul's content." Mrs Browning wrote of the "divine" picture. Browning entered, with a sympathy perhaps the more intimate that his own "angel" was with him, and the memory of an old friend peculiarly near, into sympathy with the guardian angel; but with one of his abrupt turns he passes into the world of the studio, telling us how he has written for the sake of "dear Guercino's fame," because he "did not work thus earnestly at all times, and has endured some wrong." With all this, however, the *Guardian Angel* is one of the few pieces left by Browning which do not instantly discover themselves as his. His typical children are well-springs of spiritual influence, scattering the aërial dew of quickening song upon a withered world, or taking God's ear with their "little human praise." The spirituality of this child is of a different temper,—the submissive "lamblike" temper which is fulfilled in quiescence and disturbed by thought.

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[1] *Letters of E. B. B.*, ii. 199.

What is here a mere flash of good-natured championship becomes in the great monologue of *Andrea del Sarto* an illuminating compassion. Compassion, be it noted, far less for the husband of an unfaithful wife than for the great painter whose genius was tethered to a soulless mate. The situation appealed profoundly to Browning, and Andrea's monologue is one of his most consummate pieces of dramatic characterisation. It is a study of spiritual paralysis, achieved without the least resort to the rhetorical conventions which permit poetry to express men's silence with speech and their apathy with song. Tennyson's Lotos-eaters chant their world-weariness in choral strains of almost too magnificent afflatus to be dramatically proper on the lips of spirits so resigned. Andrea's spiritual lotus-eating has paralysed the nerve of passion in him, and made him impotent to utter the lyrical cry which his fate seems to crave. He is half "incapable of his own distress"; his strongest emotions are a flitting hope or a momentary pang, quickly dissolved into the ground-tone of mournful yet serene contemplation, which seems to float ghostlike in the void between grief and joy. Reproach turns to grateful acquiescence on his lips; the sting of blighted genius is instantly annulled by the momentary enchantment of her smile, whose worth he knows too well and remembers too soon:—

> "And you smile indeed!
> This hour has been an hour! Another smile?
> If you would sit thus by me every night
> I should work better, do you comprehend?
> I mean that I should earn more, give you more."

The tragedy is for us, not for him: he regrets little, and would change still less. The "silver-grey" lights of dreamy autumn eve were never with more delicate insight rendered in terms of soul.

Suddenly these autumnal half-tones give way to the flash of torches in the fragrant darkness of an Italian night. There is a scurry of feet along a dark alley, a scuffle at the end, and the genial rotundity of Brother Lippo Lippi's face, impudent, brilliant, insuppressible, leers into the torchlight. *Fra Lippo Lippi* is not less true and vivacious than the *Andrea*, if less striking as an example of Browning's dramatic power. Sarto is a great poetic creation; Browning's own robust temperament provided hardly any aid in delineating the emaciated soul whose gifts had thinned down to a morbid perfection of technique. But this vigorous human creature, with the teeming brain, and the realist eye, and the incorrigible ineptitude for the restraints of an insincere clerical or other idealism, was a being to which Browning's heart went out;

and he even makes him the mouthpiece of literary ideas, which his own portrait as here drawn aptly exemplifies. There is not much "soul" in Lippo, but he has the hearty grasp of common things, of the world in its business and its labour and its sport and its joys, which "edifies" men more than artificial idealities designed expressly to "beat nature." He "lends his mind out" and finds the answering mind in other men instead of imposing one from without:—

> "This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink."

"Ay, but," objects the Prior, "you do not instigate to prayer!" And it is the prior and his system which for Lippi stand in the place of Andrea's soulless wife. Lucrezia's illusive beauty lured his soul to its doom; and Lippo, forced, as a child of eight, to renounce the world and put on the cassock he habitually disgraced, triumphantly cast off the incubus of a sham spirituality which only tended to obscure what was most spiritual in himself. He was fortunate in the poet who has drawn his portrait so superbly in his sitter's own style.

These two monologues belong to the most finished achievements of Browning. But we should miss much of the peculiar quality of his mind, as well as a vivid glimpse into the hope-and-fear-laden atmosphere of Tuscany in the early 'Fifties, if we had not that quaint heterogeneous causerie called *Old Pictures in Florence.* There is passion in its grotesqueness and method in its incoherence; for the old painters, whose apologies he is ostensibly writing, with their imperfect achievement and their insuppressible idealism, sounded a congenial note to men whose eyes were bent incessantly upon the horizon waiting for the invisible to come into play, and Florence looked for her completion as Giotto's unfinished campanile for its spire.

If Italy deepened Browning's hold upon the problems of painting, it witnessed the beginnings of his equally characteristic achievement in the kindred poetry of music. Not that his Italian life can have brought any notable access of musical impressions to a man who had grown up within easy reach of London concerts and operas. But England was a land in which music was performed; Italy was a land in which it was made. Verdi's "worst opera" could be heard in many places; but in Florence the knowing spectator might see Verdi himself, at its close,

> "Look through all the roaring and the wreaths
> Where sits Rossini patient in his stall."

Italian music, with its facile melody and its relative poverty of ideas, could not find so full a response in Browning's nature as Italian painting. It had had its own gracious and tender youth; and Palestrina, whom he contrasts with the mountainous fuguists of "Saxe-Gotha" and elsewhere, probably had for him the same kind of charm as the early painters of Florence. Out of that "infancy," however, there had arisen no "titanically infantine" Michelangelo, but a race of accomplished *petits maîtres*, whose characteristic achievement was the opera of the rococo age. A Goldsmith or a Sterne can make the light songs of their contemporaries eloquent even to us of gracious amenities and cultivated charm; but Browning, with the eternal April in his heart and brain, heard in the stately measures it danced to, only the eloquence of a dirge, penetrated with the sense of the mortality of such joy as theirs. Byron had sung gaily of the gaieties of Venice; but the vivacious swing of *Beppo* was less to Browning's mind than the "cold music" of Baldassare Galuppi, who made his world dance to the strains of its own requiem, and fall upon dreamy suggestions of decay in the very climax of the feast:—

"What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished,
sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions
—'Must we die?'
Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! We can
but try!"

The musician himself has no such illusions; but his music is only a more bitter echo:—

"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what
Venice earned:
The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be
discerned."

And so the poet, in the self-consciousness of his immense vitality, sweeps into the limbo of oblivion these dusty *débris* of the past, with no nearer approach to the romantic regret of a Malory for the glories of old time or to Villon's awestruck contemplation of the mysterious evanishment of storied beauty, than the half-contemptuous echo—

"'Dust and ashes!' So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair too—what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old."

In the other music-poem of the Italian time it is not difficult to detect a kindred mood beneath the half-disguise of rollicking rhymes and whimsical comparisons. Once more Browning seems preoccupied with that in music which lends expression to a soulless animation, a futile and aimless vivacity. Only here it is the vivacity of the schools, not of the ballroom. Yet some lines seem a very echo of that hollow joyless mirth, for ever revolving on itself:—

"Est fuga, volvitur rota;
On we drift: where looms the dim port?"

The intertwining and conflicting melodies of the fugue echo the impotent strife of jangling tongues, "affirming, denying, holding, risposting, subjoining,"—the shuttle play of comment and gloze shrouding the light of nature and truth:—

"Over our heads truth and nature—
Still our life's zigzags and dodges,
Ins and outs, weaving a new legislature—
God's gold just shining its last where that lodges,
Palled beneath man's usurpature."

But Browning was at heart too alive to the charm of this shuttle-play, of these zigzags and dodges,—of zigzags and dodges of every kind,—not to feel the irony of the attack upon this "stringing of Nature through cobwebs"; when the organist breaks out, as the fugue's intricacy grows, "But where's music, the dickens?" we hear Browning mocking the indignant inquiries of similar purport so often raised by his readers. *Master Hugues* could only have been written by one who, with a childlike purity of vision for truth and nature, for the shining of "God's gold" and the glimpses of the "earnest eye of heaven," had also a keen perception and instinctive delight in every filament of the web of human "legislature."

This double aspect of Browning's poetic nature is vividly reflected in the memorable essay on Shelley which he wrote at Paris in 1851, as an introduction to a series of letters since shown to have been forged. The essay—unfortunately not included in his Works—is a document of first-rate importance for the mind of Browning in the midst of his greatest time; it is also by far the finest appreciation of Shelley which had yet appeared. He saw in Shelley one who, visionary and subjective as he was, had solved the problem which confronts every idealist who seeks to grasp the visible world in its concrete actuality. To Browning himself that problem presented itself in a form which tasked far more severely the resources of poetic imagination, in proportion as actuality bodied itself forth to his alert senses in more despotic grossness and strength. Shelley is commonly thought to have evaded this task altogether, — building his dream-world of cloud and cavern loveliness remote from anything we know. It is Browning, the most "actual" of poets, who insisted, half a century ago, on the "practicality" of Shelley,— insisted, as it is even now not superfluous to insist, on the fearless and direct energy with which he strove to root his intuitions in experience. "His noblest and predominating characteristic," he urges, to quote these significant words once more, "is his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the absolute, and of Beauty and Good in the concrete, while he throws, from his poet's station between both, swifter, subtler, and more numerous films for the connection of each with each than have been thrown by any modern artificer of whom I have knowledge; proving how, as he says—

> "'The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
> In love and worship blends itself with God.'"

Browning has nowhere else expounded so fully his ideas about the aims of his own art. It lay in the peculiar "dramatic" quality of his mind to express himself freely only in situations not his own. Hence, while he does not altogether avoid the poet as a character, his poets are drawn with a curious externality and detachment. It is in his musicians, his painters, his grammarians, that the heart and passion of Browning the poet really live. He is the poet of musicians and of painters, the poet of lawyers and physicians and Rabbis, and of scores of callings which never had a poet before; but he is not the poets' poet. In the *Transcendentalism*, however, after tilting with gay irony at the fault of overmuch argument in poetry, which the world ascribed to his own, he fixes in a splendid image the magic which it fitfully yet consummately illustrates. The reading public which entertained any opinion about him at all was inclined to take him for another Boehme, "with a tougher book and subtler meanings of what roses say." A few knew that they had to deal, not less, with a "stout Mage like him of Halberstadt," who

> "with a 'look you' vents a brace of rhymes,
> And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
> Over us, under, round us every side."

The portrait of the poet of Valladolid, on the other hand (*How it Strikes a Contemporary*), is not so much a study of a poet as of popular misconception and obtuseness. A grotesquely idle legend of the habits of the "Corregidor" flourishes among the good folks of Valladolid; the speaker himself, who desires to do him justice, is a plain, shrewd, but unimaginative observer ("I never wrote a line of verse, did you?"), and makes us acquainted with everything but the inner nature of the man. We see the corregidor in the streets, in his chamber, at his frugal supper and "decent cribbage" with his maid, but never at his verse. We see the alert objective eye of this man with the "scrutinizing hat," who

> "stood and watched the cobbler at his trade, . . .
> If any beat a horse, you felt he saw,
> If any cursed a woman, he took note,"—

and all this, for Browning, went to the making of the poet, but we get no inkling of the process itself. Browning had, in his obscure as in his famous days, peculiar opportunities of measuring the perversities of popular repute. Later on, in the heyday of his renown, he chaffed its critical dispensers in his most uproarious vein in *Pacchiarotto*. The *Popularity* stanzas present us with a theory of it conveyed in that familiar manner of mingled poetry and grotesqueness which was one of the obstacles to his own.

There is, however, among these fifty men and women one true and sublime poet,—the dying "Grammarian," who applies the alchemy of a lofty imagination to the dry business of verbal erudition.

> "He said, 'What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!
> Man has Forever.'"

This is one of the half-dozen lyrics which enshrine in noble and absolutely individual form the central core of Browning's passion and thought. Even the verse, with its sequence of smooth-flowing iambics broken by the leap of the dactyl, and the difficult double rhyme, sustains the mood of victorious but not lightly won serenity of soul—"too full for sound and foam." It is, among songs over the dead, what *Rabbi ben Ezra* and *Prospice* are among the songs which face and grapple with death; the fittest requiem to follow such deaths as those. Like Ben Ezra, the Grammarian "trusts death," and stakes his life on the trust:—

> "He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success
> Found, or earth's failure:
> 'Wilt thou trust death or not?' He answered, 'Yes:
> Hence with life's pale lure!'"

To ordinary eyes he spends his days grovelling among the dust and dregs of erudition; but it is the grovelling of a builder at work upon a fabric so colossally planned that life is fitly spent in laying the foundations. He was made in the large mould of the gods,—born with "thy face and throat, Lyric Apollo,"—and the disease which crippled and silenced him in middle life could only alter the tasks on which he wreaked his mind. And now that he is dead, he passes, as by right, to the fellowship of the universe—of the sublime things of nature.

> "Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
> Lightnings are loosened,
> Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
> Peace let the dew send!
> Lofty designs must close in like effects:
> Loftily lying,
> Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
> Living and dying."

VI.

The Grammarian's Funeral achieves, in the terms and with the resources of Browning's art, the problem of which he saw the consummate master in Shelley,—that of throwing "films" for the connexion of Power and Love in the abstract with Beauty and Good in the concrete, and finding a link between the lowliest service or worship and the spirit of God. Such a conception of a poet's crowning glory implied a peculiarly close relation in Browning's view between poetry and religion, and in particular with the religion which, above all others, glorified the lowly. Here lay, in short, the supreme worth for him of the Christian idea. "The revelation of God in Christ" was for him the consummate example of that union of divine love with the world—"through all the web of Being blindly wove"—which Shelley had contemplated in the radiant glow of his poetry; accepted by the reason, as he wrote a few years later, it solved "all problems in the earth and out of it." To that solution Shelley seemed to Browning to be on the way, and his incomplete grasp of it appealed to him more powerfully than did the elaborate dogmatisms professedly based upon it. Shelley had mistaken "Churchdom" for Christianity; but he was on the way, Browning was convinced, to become a Christian himself. "I shall say what I think,—had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians."

This emphatic declaration is of great importance for Browning's intellectual history. He may have overlooked the immense barriers which must have always divided Shelley from the Christian world of his time; he may have overlooked also that the Christian thought of our time has in some important points "ranged itself with" Shelley; so that the Christianity which he might finally have adopted would have been sufficiently unlike that which he assailed. But it is clear that for Browning himself the essence of Christianity lay at this time in something not very remote from what he revered as the essence of Shelleyism—a corollary, as it were, ultimately implicit in his thought.

It was thus a deeper poetical rather than a religious or doctrinal interest which drew Browning in these Italian years, again and again to seek his revealing experiences of souls amid the eddies and convulsions, the exultations and the agonies, brought into the world by the amazing "revelation of God in Christ." It is true that we nowhere approach this focus of interest, that we have no glimpse, through Browning's art, how that "revelation" shaped itself in the first disciples, far less of Christ himself. But that was at no time Browning's way of bringing to expression what he deeply cared for. He would not trumpet forth truth in his own person, or blazon it through the lips of the highest recognised authority; he let it struggle up through the baffling density, or glimmer through the conflicting persuasions of alien minds, and break out in cries of angry wonder or involuntary recognition. And nowhere is this method carried further than in the Christian poems of the Italian time. The supreme musicians and painters he avoids, but Fra Lippo Lippi and Master Hugues belong at least to the crafts whose secrets they expound; while the Christian idea is set in a borrowed light caught from the souls of men outside the Christian world—an Arab physician, a Greek poet, a Jewish shepherd or rabbi, or from Christians yet farther from the centre than these, like Blougram and the Abbé Deodaet. In method as in conception these pieces are among the most Browningesque things that Browning ever wrote. It is clear, however, that while his way of handling these topics is absolutely his own, his peculiar concern with them is new. The *Karshish*, the *Cleon*, and the *Blougram* have no prototype or parallel among the poems of Browning's previous periods. In the early Dramatic Lyrics and Romances, and in the plays, there is exquisite rendering of religion, and also of irreligion; but the religion is just the simple faith of Pippa or of Theocrite that "God's in his world"; and the irreligion is the Humanist paganism of St Praxed's, not so much hostile to Christianity as unconscious of it. No single poem written before 1850 shows that acute interest in the problems of Christian faith which constantly emerges in the work of this and the following years. *Saul*, which might be regarded as signally refuting this view, strikingly confirms it; the David of the first nine sections, which alone were produced in 1845, being the naïve, devout child, brother of Pippa and of Theocrite; the evolution of this harping shepherd-boy into the illuminated prophet of Christ was the splendid achievement of the later years.[1] And to all this more acutely Christian work the *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850) served as a significant prologue.

There can be little doubt that the devout Christian faith of his wife was principally concerned in this new direction of his poetry. Yet we may easily overstate both the nature of her influence and its extent. She, as little as he, was a dogmatic Christian; both refused to put on, in her phrase, "any of the liveries of the sects."[2] "The truth, as God sees it, must be something so different from these opinions about truth. . . . I believe in what is divine and floats at highest, in all these different theologies,—and because the really Divine draws together souls, and tends so to a unity, I could pray anywhere and with all sorts of worshippers, from the Sistine chapel to Mr Fox's, those kneeling and those standing."[3] Yet she demurs, a little farther on in the same letter, to both these extremes. "The Unitarians seem to me to throw over what is most beautiful in the Christian Doctrine; but the Formulists, on the other side, stir up a dust, in which it appears excusable not to see." To which he replies (Aug. 17): "Dearest, I know your very meaning, in what you said of religion, and responded to it with my whole soul—what you express now is for us both, . . . those are my own feelings, my convictions beside—instinct confirmed by reason."

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[1] It is, indeed, clear, as has been seen, from Browning's correspondence that a sequel of this kind was intended when the first nine sections were published. The traditional legend of David would in any case suggest so much. That the intention was not then executed is just the significant fact.

[2] *E. B. B. to R. B.*, 15th Aug. 1846.

[3] Ib.

These words of Browning's seem to furnish the clue to the relation between their minds in this matter. Their intercourse disturbed no conviction on either side, for their convictions were identical. But her intense personal devoutness undoubtedly quickened what was personal in his belief, drew it into an atmosphere of keener and more emotional consciousness, and in particular gave to that "revelation of God in Christ" which they both regarded as what was "most beautiful in the Christian doctrine," a more vital hold upon his intellectual and imaginative life. In this sense, but only in this sense, his fervid words to her (February 1846)—"I mean to . . . let my mind get used to its new medium of sight, seeing all things as it does through you; and then let all I have done be the prelude and the real work begin"—were not unfulfilled. No deep hiatus, such as this phrase suggests, divides the later, as a whole, from the earlier work: the "dramatic" method, which was among the elements of his art most foreign to her lyric nature, established itself more and more firmly in his practice. But the letters of 1845-46 show that her example was stimulating him to attempt a more direct and personal utterance in poetry, and while he did not succeed, or succeeded only "once and for one only," in evading his dramatic bias, he certainly succeeded in making the dramatic form more eloquently expressive of his personal faith.

This was peculiarly the case in the remarkable *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850), the first-fruits of his married life, and the most instinct of all his poems with the mingled literary and religious influences which it brought. The influence of the ardent singer, which impelled him to fuller self-expression, here concurred with that of the devout but undogmatic Christian, which drew the problem of Christianity nearer to the focus of his imagination and his thought. There is much throughout which suggests that Browning was deliberately putting off the habits and usages of his art, and reaching out this way and that towards untried sources and avenues of expression. He lays hold for the first time of the machinery of supernatural vision. Nothing that he had yet done approached in boldness these Christmas and Easter apparitions of the Lord of Love. They break in, unheralded, a startling but splendid anomaly, upon his human and actual world. And the really notable thing is that never had he drawn human actuality with so remorseless and even brutal fidelity as just here. He seeks no legendary scene and atmosphere like that of Theocrite's Rome, in which the angels who come and go, and God who enjoys his "little human praise," would be missed if they were not there; but opens the visions of the Empyrean upon modern Camberwell. The pages in which Browning might seem, for once, to vie with the author of the Apocalypse are interleaved with others in which, for once, he seems to vie with Balzac or Zola. Of course this is intensely characteristic of Browning. The quickened spiritual pulse which these poems betoken betrays itself just in his more daringly assured embrace of the heights and the depths of the universe, as communicating and akin, prompting also that not less daring embrace of the extremes of expression,—sublime imagery and rollicking rhymes, — as equally genuine utterances of spiritual fervour,—

> "When frothy spume and frequent sputter
> Prove that the soul's depths boil in earnest."

These lines, and the great Shelleyan declaration that

> "A loving worm within its clod
> Were diviner than a loveless God,"

are the key to both poems, but peculiarly to the *Christmas-Day*, in which they occur. We need not in any wise identify Browning with the Christmas-Day visionary; but it is clear that what is "dramatic" in him exfoliates, as it were, from a root of character and thought which are altogether Browning's own. Browning is apparent in the vivacious critic and satirist of religious extravagances, standing a little aloof from all the constituted religions; but he is apparent also in the imaginative and sympathetic student of religion, who divines the informing spark of love in all sincere worship; and however far he may have been from putting forward the little conventicle with its ruins of humanity, its soul at struggle with insanity, as his own final choice, that choice symbolised in a picturesque half-humorous way his own profound preference for the spiritual good which is hardly won. He makes the speaker choose the "earthen vessel" in spite of its "taints of earth," because it brimmed with spiritual water; but in Browning himself there was something which relished the spiritual water the more because the earthen vessel was flawed.

Like *Christmas-Eve*, *Easter-Day* is a dramatic study, —profound convictions of the poet's own being projected as it were through forms of religious consciousness perceptibly more angular and dogmatically defined than his own. The main speaker is plainly not identical with the narrator of *Christmas-Eve*, who is incidentally referred to as "our friend." Their first beliefs may be much alike, but in the temper of their belief they differ widely. The speaker in *Christmas-Eve* is a genial if caustic observer, submitting with robust tolerance to the specks in the water which quenches his thirst; the speaker of *Easter-Day* is an anxious precisian, fearful of the contamination of earth, and hoping that he may "yet escape" the doom of too facile content. The problem of the one is, what to believe; the problem of the other, how to believe; and each is helped towards a solution by a vision of divine love. But the Easter-Day Vision conveys a sterner message than that of *Christmas-Eve*. Love now illuminates, not by enlarging sympathy and disclosing the hidden soul of good in error, but by suppressing sympathies too diffusely and expansively bestowed. The Christmas Vision makes humanity seem more divine; the Easter Vision makes the divine seem less human. The hypersensitive moral nature of the Easter-Day speaker, on the other hand, sees his own criminal darkness of heart and mind before all else, and the divine visitation becomes a Last Judgment, with the fierce vindictive red of the Northern Lights replacing the mild glory of the lunar rainbows, and a stern and scornful cross-examination the silent swift convoy of the winged robe. This difference of temper is vividly expressed in the style. The rollicking rhymes, the "spume and sputter" of the fervent soul, give place to a manner of sustained seriousness and lyric beauty.

Yet the Easter-Day speaker probes deeper and raises more fundamental issues. When the form of Christian belief to be adopted has been settled, a certain class of believing minds, not the least estimable, will still remain restive. Browning of all men felt impatient of every nominal belief held as unassimilated material, not welded into the living substance of character; and he makes his Easter-Day visionary confound with withering irony the "faith" which seeks assurance in outward "evidence,"—

"'Tis found,
No doubt: as is your sort of mind,
So is your sort of search: you'll find
What you desire."

Still less mercy has he for the dogmatic voluptuary who complacently assumes the "all-stupendous tale" of Christianity to have been enacted

> "to give our joys a zest,
> And prove our sorrows for the best."

Upon these complacent materialisms and epicureanisms of the religious character falls the scorching splendour of the Easter Vision, with its ruthless condemnation of whatever is not glorified by Love, passing over into the uplifting counter-affirmation, indispensable to Browning's optimism, that—

> "All thou dost enumerate
> Of power and beauty in the world
> The mightiness of Love was curled
> Inextricably round about."

With all their nobility of feeling, and frequent splendour of description, these twin poems cannot claim a place in Browning's work at all corresponding to the seriousness with which he put them forward, and the imposing imaginative apparatus called in. The strong personal conviction which seems to have been striving for direct utterance, checked without perfectly mastering his dramatic instincts and habitudes, resulting in a beautiful but indecisive poetry which lacks both the frankness of a personal deliverance and the plasticity of a work of art. The speakers can neither be identified with the poet nor detached from him; they are neither his mouthpieces nor his creations. The daring supernaturalism seems to indicate that the old spell of Dante, so keenly felt in the *Sordello* days, had been wrought to new potency by the magic of the life in Dante's Florence, and the subtler magic of the love which he was presently to compare not obscurely to that of Dante for Beatrice.[1] The divine apparitions have the ironic hauteurs and sarcasms of Beatrice in the *Paradise*. Yet the comparison brings into glaring prominence the radical incoherence of Browning's presentment. In Dante's world all the wonders that he describes seem to be in place; but the Christmas and Easter Visions are felt as intrusive anachronisms in modern London, where the divinest influences are not those which become palpable in visions, but those which work through heart and brain.

Browning probably felt this, for the *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* stands in this respect alone in his work. But the idea of Christ as the sign and symbol of the love which penetrates the universe lost none of its hold upon his imagination; and it inspired some of the greatest achievements of the *Men and Women*. It was under this impulse that he now, at some time during the early Italian years, completed the splendid torso of *Saul*. David's Vision of the Christ that is to be has as little apparent relation to the quiet pastoralism of the earlier stanzas as the Easter Vision to the common-sense reflections that preceded it. But while this Vision abruptly bursts upon him, David's is the final conquest of his own ardent intellect, under the impulse of a great human task which lifts it beyond its experience, and calls out all its powers. David is occupied with no speculative question, but with the practical problem of saving a ruined soul; and neither logical ingenuity nor divine suggestion, but the inherent spiritual significance of the situation, urges his thought along the lonely path of prophecy. The love for the old king, which prompts him to try all the hidden paths of his soul in quest of healing, becomes a lighted torch by which he tracks out the meaning of the world and the still unrevealed purposes of God; until the energy of thought culminates in vision, and the Christ stands full before his eyes. All that is supernatural in the *Saul* is viewed through the fervid atmosphere of David's soul. The magic of the wonderful Nocturne at the close, where he feels his way home through the appalled and serried gloom, is broken by no apparition; the whole earth is alive and awake around him, and thrills to the quickening inrush of the "new land"; but its light is the tingling emotion of the stars, and its voice the cry of the little brooks; and the thronging cohorts of angels and powers are unuttered and unseen.

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[1] *One Word More.*

Only less beautiful than Browning's pictures of spiritual childhood are his pictures of spiritual maturity and old age. The lyric simplicity, the naïve intensity which bear a David, a Pippa, a Pompilia without effort into the region of the highest spiritual vision, appealed less fully to his imagination than the more complex and embarrassed processes through which riper minds forge their way towards the completed insight of a Rabbi ben

Ezra. In this sense, the great song of David has a counterpart in the subtle dramatic study of the Arab physician Karshish. He also is startled into discovery by a unique experience. But where David is lifted on and on by a continuous tide of illuminating thought, perfectly new and strange, but to which nothing in him opposes the semblance of resistance, Karshish feels only a mysterious attraction, which he hardly confesses, and which all the intellectual habits and convictions of a life given up to study and thought seem to gainsay. No touch of worldly motive belongs to either. The shepherd-boy is not more single-souled than this devoted "picker up of learning's crumbs," who makes nothing of perilous and toilsome journeys for the sake of his art, who is threatened by hungry wild beasts, stripped and beaten by robbers, arrested as a spy. At every step his quick scrutiny is rewarded by the discovery of some new drug, mineral, or herb,—"things of price"—"blue flowering borage, the Aleppo sort," or "Judæa's gum-tragacanth." But Karshish has much of the temper of Browning himself: these technicalities are the garb of a deep underlying mysticism. This man's flesh so admirably made by God is yet but the earthly prison for "that puff of vapour from his mouth, man's soul." The case of Lazarus, though at once, as a matter of course, referred to the recognised medical categories, yet strangely puzzles and arrests him, with a fascination that will not be put by. This abstracted docile man of perfect physical vigour, who heeds the approach of the Roman avenger as he would the passing of a woman with gourds by the way, and is yet no fool, who seems apathetic and yet loves the very brutes and the flowers of the field,—compels his scrutiny, as a phenomenon of soul, and it is with the eye of a psychological idealist rather than of a physician that he interprets him:—

> "He holds on firmly to some thread of life— . . .
> Which runs across some vast distracting orb
> Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
> Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—
> The spiritual life around the earthly life:
> The law of that is known to him as this,
> His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.
> So is the man perplext with impulses
> Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,
> Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,
> And not along, this black thread through the blaze—
> 'It should be' baulked by 'here it cannot be.'"

Lazarus stands where Paracelsus conceived that he himself stood: he "knows God's secret while he holds the thread of life"; he lives in the glare of absolute knowledge, an implicit criticism of the Paracelsian endeavour to let in upon men the searing splendour of the unclouded day. To Karshish, however, these very embarrassments — so unlike the knowing cleverness of the spiritual charlatan — make it credible that Lazarus is indeed no oriental Sludge, but one who has verily seen God. But then came the terrible crux,—the pretension, intolerable to Semitic monotheism, that God had been embodied in a man. The words scorch the paper as he writes, and, like Ferishtah, he will not repeat them.

Yet he cannot escape the spell of the witness, and the strange thought clings tenaciously to him, defying all the evasive shifts of a trained mind, and suddenly overmastering him when his concern with it seems finally at an end—when his letter is finished, pardon asked, and farewell said—in that great outburst, startling and unforeseen yet not incredible :—

> "The very God ! think, Abib ; dost thou think ?
> So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too,—
> So, through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here !'
> Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!"

That words like these, intensely Johannine in conception, should seem to start naturally from a mind which just before has shrunk in horror from the idea of an approximation between God and that which He fashioned, is an extraordinary *tour de force* of dramatic portraiture. Among the minor traits which contribute to it is one of a kind to which Browning rarely resorts. The "awe" which invests Lazarus is heightened by a mystic setting of landscape. The visionary scene of his first meeting with Karshish, though altogether Browningesque in detail, is Wordsworthian in its mysterious effect upon personality:—

> "I crossed a ridge of short, sharp, broken hills
> Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
> A moon made like a face with certain spots
> Multiform, manifold and menacing :
> Then a wind rose behind me."

A less formidable problem is handled in the companion study of *Cleon*. The Greek mind fascinated Browning, though most of his renderings of it have the savour of a salt not gathered in Attica, and his choice of types shows a strong personal bias. From the heroic and majestic elder art of Greece he turns with pronounced preference to Euripides the human and the positive, with his facile and versatile intellect, his agile criticism, and his "warm tears." It is somewhat along these lines that he has conceived his Greek poet of the days of Karshish, confronted, like the Arab doctor, with the "new thing." As Karshish is at heart a spiritual idealist, for all his preoccupation with drugs and stones, so Cleon, a past-master of poetry and painting, is among the most positive and worldly-wise of men. He looks back over a life scored with literary triumphs, as Karshish over his crumbs of learning gathered at the cost of blows and obloquy. But while Karshish has the true scholar's dispassionate and self-effacing thirst for knowledge, Cleon measures his achievements with the insight of an epicurean artist. He gathers in luxuriously the incense of universal applause,—his epos inscribed on golden plates, his songs rising from every fishing-bark at nightfall,—and wistfully contrasts the vast range of delights which as an artist he imagines, with the limited pleasures which as a man he enjoys. The magnificent symmetry, the rounded completeness of his life, suffer a serious deduction here, and his Greek sense of harmony suffers offence as well as his human hunger for joy. He is a thorough realist, and finds no satisfaction in contemplating what he may not possess. Art itself suffers disparagement, as heightening this vain capacity of contemplation :—

> "I know the joy of kingship : well, thou art king !"

With great ingenuity this Greek realism is made the stepping-stone to a conception of immortality as un-Greek as that of the Incarnation is un-Semitic. Karshish shrank intuitively from a conception which fascinated while it awed; to Cleon a future state in which joy and capability will be brought again to equality seems a most plausible supposition, which he only rejects with a sigh for lack of outer evidence :—

> "Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas,
> He must have done so, were it possible !"

The little vignette in the opening lines finely symbolises the brilliant Greek decadence, as does the closing picture in Karshish the mystic dawn of the Earth. Here the portico, flooded with the glory of a sun about to set, profusely heaped with treasures of art; there the naked uplands of Palestine, and the moon rising over jagged hills in a wind-swept sky.

In was in such grave *adagio* notes as these that Browning chose to set forth the "intimations of immortality" in the meditative wisdom and humanity of heathendom. The after-fortunes of the Christian legend, on the other hand, and the naïve ferocities and fantasticalities of the medieval world provoked him rather to *scherzo*, — audacious and inimitable *scherzo*, riotously grotesque on the surface, but with a grotesqueness so penetrated and informed by passion that it becomes sublime. *Holy-Cross Day* and *The Heretic's Tragedy* both culminate, like *Karshish* and *Cleon*, in a glimpse of Christ. But here, instead of being approached through stately avenues of meditation, it is wrung from the grim tragedy of persecution and martyrdom. The Jews, packed like rats to hear the sermon, mutter under their breath the sublime song of Ben Ezra, one of the most poignant indictments of Christianity in the name of Christ ever conceived :—

> "We withstood Christ then? Be mindful how
> At least we withstand Barabbas now!
> Was our outrage sore? But the worst we spared,
> To have called these—Christians, had we dared!
> Let defiance of them pay mistrust of Thee,
> And Rome make amends for Calvary!"

And John of Molay, as he burns in Paris Square, cries upon "the Name he had cursed with all his life." The *Tragedy* stands alone in literature; Browning has written nothing more original. Its singularity springs mainly from a characteristic and wonderfully successful attempt to render several planes of emotion and animus through the same tale. The "singer" looks on at the burning, the very embodiment of the robust, savagely genial spectator, with a keen eye for all the sporting-points in the exhibition,—noting that the fagots are piled to the right height and are of the right quality—

"Good sappy bavins that kindle forthwith, . . .
Larch-heart that chars to a chalk-white glow:"

and when the torch is clapt-to and he has "leapt back safe," poking jests and gibes at the victim. But through this distorting medium we see the soul of John himself, like a gleam-lit landscape through the whirl of a storm; a strange weird sinister thing, glimmering in a dubious light between the blasphemer we half see in him with the singer's eyes and the saint we half descry with our own. Of explicit pathos there is not a touch. Yet how subtly the inner pathos and the outward scorn are fused in the imagery of these last stanzas:—

"Ha, ha, John plucketh now at his rose
To rid himself of a sorrow at heart!
Lo,—petal on petal, fierce rays unclose;
Anther on anther, sharp spikes outstart;
And with blood for dew, the bosom boils;
And a gust of sulphur is all its smell;
And lo, he is horribly in the toils
Of a coal-black giant flower of hell!

So, as John called now, through the fire amain,
On the Name, he had cursed with, all his life—
To the Person, he bought and sold again—
For the Face, with his daily buffets rife—
Feature by feature It took its place:
And his voice, like a mad dog's choking bark,
At the steady whole of the Judge's face—
Died. Forth John's soul flared into the dark."

None of these dramatic studies of Christianity attracted so lively an interest as *Bishop Blougram's Apology*. It was "actual" beyond anything he had yet done; it portrayed under the thinnest of veils an illustrious Catholic prelate familiar in London society; it could be enjoyed with little or no feeling for poetry; and it was amazingly clever. Even Tennyson, his loyal friend but unwilling reader, excepted it, on the last ground, from his slighting judgment upon *Men and Women* at large. The figure of Blougram, no less than his discourse, was virtually new in Browning, and could have come from him at no earlier time. He is foreshadowed, no doubt, by a series of those accomplished mundane ecclesiastics whom Browning at all times drew with so keen a zest,—by Ogniben, the bishop in *Pippa Passes*, the bishop of St Praxed's. But mundane as he is, he bears the mark of that sense of the urgency of the Christian problem which since *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* had so largely and variously coloured Browning's work. It occurred to none of those worldly bishops to justify their worldliness,—it was far too deeply ingrained for that. But Blougram's brilliant defence, enormously disproportioned as it is to the insignificance of the attack, marks his tacit recognition of loftier ideals than he professes. Like Cleon, he bears involuntary witness to what he repudiates.

But there is much more in Blougram than this. The imposing personality of Wiseman contained much to attract and conciliate a poet like Browning, whose visionary idealism went along with so unaffected a relish for the world and the talents which succeed there. A great spiritual ruler, performing with congenial ease the enormous and varied functions of his office, and with intellectual resources, when they were discharged, to win distinction in scholarship, at chess, in society, appealed powerfully to Browning's congenital delight in all strong and vivid life. He was a great athlete, who had completely mastered his circumstances and shaped his life to his will. Opposed to a man of this varied and brilliant achievement, an ineffectual dilettante appeared a sorry creature enough; and Browning, far from taking his part and putting in his craven mouth the burning retorts which the reader in vain expects, makes him play helplessly with olive-stones while the great bishop rolls him out his mind, and then, as one cured and confuted, betake himself to the life of humbler practical activity and social service.

It is plain that the actual Blougram offered tempting points of contact with that strenuous ideal of life which he was later to preach through the lips of "Rabbi ben Ezra." Even what was most problematic in him, his apparently sincere profession of an outworn creed, suggested the difficult feat of a gymnast balancing on a narrow edge, or forcibly holding his unbelief in check,—

> "Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot,
> Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe."

But Browning marks clearly the element both of self-deception and deliberate masquerade in Blougram's defence. He made him "say right things and call them by wrong names." The intellectual athlete in him went out to the intellectual athlete in the other, and rejoiced in every equation he seemed to establish. He played, and made Blougram play, upon the elusive resemblance between the calm of effortless mastery and that of hardly won control.

The rich and varied poetry reviewed in the last three sections occupies less than half of *Men and Women*, and leaves the second half of the title unexplained. In that richer emotional atmosphere which breathes from every line of his Italian work, the profound fulfilment of his spiritual needs which he found in his home was the most vital and potent element. His imaginative grasp of every kind of spiritual energy, of every "incident of soul," was deepened by his new but incessant and unqualified experience of love. His poetry focussed itself more persistently than ever about those creative energies akin to love, of which art in the fullest sense is the embodiment, and religion the recognition. It would have been strange if the special form of love-experience to which the quickening thrill was due had remained untouched by it. In fact, however, the title of the volume is significant as well as accurate; for Browning's poetry of the love between men and women may be said, save for a few simple though exquisite earlier notes, to begin with it.

VII.

The love-poetry of the *Men and Women* volumes, as originally published, was the most abundant and various, if not the most striking, part of its contents. It was almost entirely transferred, in the collected edition of his Poems issued in 1863, to other rubrics, to the *Dramatic Lyrics*, of which it now forms the great bulk, and to the *Dramatic Romances*. But of Browning's original "fifty men and women," nearly half were lovers or occupied with love. Such fertility was natural enough in the first years of a supremely happy marriage, crowning an early manhood in which love of any kind had, for better or worse, played hardly any part at all. Yet almost nothing in these beautiful and often brilliant lyrics is in any strict sense personal. The biographer who searches them for traits quivering with intimate experience searches all but in vain. Browning's own single and supreme passion touched no fountain of song, such as love sets flowing in most poets and in many who are not poets: even the memorable months of 1845-46 provoked no Sonnets "*to* the Portuguese." His personal story impresses itself upon his poetry only through the preoccupation which it induces with the love-stories of other people, mostly quite unlike his own. The white light of his own perfect union broke from that prismatic intellect of his in a poetry brilliant with almost every other hue. No English poet of his century, and few of any other, have made love seem so wonderful; but he habitually takes this wonder bruised and jostled in the grip of thwarting conditions. In his way of approaching love Browning strangely blends the mystic's exaltation with the psychologist's cool penetrating scrutiny of its accompanying phenomena, its favourable or impeding conditions. The keen analytic accent of Paracelsus mingles with the ecstatic unearthly note of Shelley. "Love is all" might have served as the text for the whole volume of Browning's love-poetry; but the text is wrought out with an amazingly acute vision for all the things which are not love. "Love triumphing over the world" might have been the motto for most of the love-poems in *Men and Women;* but some would have had to be assigned to the opposite rubric, "The world triumphing over love." Sometimes Love's triumph is, for Browning, the rapture of complete union, for which all outer things exist only by subduing themselves to its mood and taking its hue; sometimes it is the more ascetic and spiritual triumph of an unrequited lover in the lonely glory of his love.

The triumph of Browning's united lovers has often a superb Elizabethan note of defiance. Passion obliterates for them the past and throws a mystically hued veil over Nature. The gentle Romantic sentiments hardly touch the fresh springs of their emotion. They may meet and woo "among the ruins," as Coleridge met and wooed his Genevieve "beside the ruined tower"; but their song does not, like his, "suit well that ruin old and hoary," but, on the contrary, tramples with gay scorn upon the lingering memories of the ruined city,—a faded pageant yoked to its triumphal car.

"Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!
Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise, and sin!
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
Love is best."

Another lover, in *My Star*, pours lyric disdain upon his friends for whose purblind common-sense vision the star which to him "dartled red and blue," now a bird, now a flower, was just—a star. More finely touched than either of these is *By the Fireside.* After *One Word More*, to which it is obviously akin, it is Browning's most perfect rendering of the luminous inner world, all-sufficing and self-contained, of a rapturous love. The outer world is here neither thrust aside nor fantastically varied; it is drawn into the inner world by taking its hue and becoming the confidant and executant of its will. A landscape so instinct with the hushed awe of expectation and with a mystic tenderness is hardly to be found elsewhere save in *Christabel*,—

"We two stood there with never a third,
  But each by each, as each knew well:
The sights we saw and the sounds we heard,
  The lights and the shades made up a spell,
Till the trouble grew and stirred.

. . . .

A moment after, and hands unseen
  Were hanging the night around us fast;
But we knew that a bar was broken between
  Life and life: we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen.

The forests had done it; there they stood;
  We caught for a moment the powers at play:
They had mingled us so, for once and good,
  Their work was done—we might go or stay,
They relapsed to their ancient mood."

By the Fireside is otherwise memorable as portraying with whatever disguise the Italian home-life of the poet and his wife. The famous description of "the perfect wife" as she sat

> "Musing by firelight, that great brow
> And the spirit-small hand propping it,
> Yonder, my heart knows how"—

remain among the most living portraitures of that exquisite but fragile form. Yet neither here nor elsewhere did Browning care to dwell upon the finished completeness of the perfect union. His intellectual thirst for the problematic, and his ethical thirst for the incomplete, combined to hurry him away to the moments of suspense, big with undecided or unfulfilled fate. The lover among the ruins is awaiting his mistress; the rapturous expectancy of another waiting lover is sung in *In Three Days.* And from the fireside the poet wanders in thought from that highest height of love which he has won to the mystic hour before he wòn it, when the elements out of which his fate was to be resolved still hung apart, awaiting the magical touch, which might never be given:—

> "Oh moment, one and infinite!
> The water slips o'er stock and stone;
> The West is tender, hardly bright:
> How grey at once is the evening grown—
> One star, its chrysolite!

. . . .

Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
  And the little less, and what worlds away!
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
  Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
And life be a proof of this!"

But the poet who lingered over these moments of suspended fate did not usually choose the harmonious solution of them. The "little less" of incomplete response might "suspend the breath" of the lover, but it was an inexhaustible inspiration to the poet. It provokes, for instance, the delicate symbolism of the twin lyrics *Love in a Life* and *Life in a Love*, variations on the same theme—vain pursuit of the averted face—the one a *largo*, sad, persistent, dreamily hopeless; the other impetuous, resolute, glad. The dreamier mood is elaborated in the *Serenade at the Villa* and *One Way of Love*. A few superbly imaginative phrases bring the Italian summer night about us, sultry, storm-shot, starless, still,—

"Life was dead, and so was light."

The Serenader himself is no child of Italy but a meditative Teuton, who, Hamlet-like, composes for his mistress the answer which he would not have her give. The lover in *One Way of Love* is something of a Teuton too, and has thoughts which break the vehemence of the impact of his fate. But there is a first moment when he gasps and knits himself closer to endure—admirably expressed in the sudden change to a brief trochaic verse; then the grim mood is dissolved in a momentary ecstasy of remembrance or of idea—and the verse, too, unfolds and releases itself in sympathy:—

> "She will not hear my music? So!
> Break the string; fold music's wing;
> Suppose Pauline had bade me sing!"

Or, instead of this systole and diastole alternation, the glory and the pang are fused and interpenetrated in a continuous mood. Such a mood furnishes the spiritual woof of one of Browning's most consummate and one of his loveliest lyrics, *The Last Ride Together* and *Evelyn Hope*. "How are we to take it?" asks Mr Fotheringham of the latter. "As the language of passion resenting death and this life's woeful incompleteness? or as a prevision of the soul in a moment of intensest life?" The question may be asked; yet the passion of regret which glows and vibrates through it is too suffused with exalted faith in a final recovery to find poignant expression. This lyric, with its taking melody, has delighted thousands to whom Browning is otherwise "obscure," partly because it appeals with naïve audacity at once to Romantic and to Christian sentiment—combining the faith in love's power to seal its object for ever as its own with the Christian faith in personal immortality—a personal immortality in which there is yet marrying and giving in marriage, as Romance demands. *The Last Ride Together* has attracted a different audience. Its passion is of a rarer and more difficult kind, less accessible to the love and less flattering to the faith of common minds. This lover dreams of no future recovery of more than he still retains; his love, once for all, avails nothing; and the secure faith of Evelyn's lover, that "God creates the love to reward the love," is not his. His mistress will never "awake and remember and understand." But that dead form he is permitted to clasp; and in the rapture of that phantom companionship passion and thought slowly transfigure and glorify his fate, till from the lone limbo of outcast lovers he seems to have penetrated to the innermost fiery core of life, which art and poetry grope after in vain—to possess that supreme moment of earth which, prolonged, is heaven.

"What if heaven be that, fair and strong
At life's best, with our eyes upturned
Whither life's flower is first discerned,
  We, fixed so, ever should so abide?
What if we still ride on, we two
With life for ever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity,—
And heaven just prove that I and she
  Ride, ride together, for ever ride?"

The "glory of failure" is with Browning a familiar and inexhaustible theme; but its spiritual abstraction here flushes with the human glory of possession; the æthereal light and dew are mingled with breath and blood; and in the wonderful long-drawn rhythm of the verse we hear the steady stride of the horses as they bear their riders farther and farther in to the visionary land of Romance.

It is only the masculine lover whom Browning allows thus to get the better of unreturned love. His women have no such *remedia amoris;* their heart's blood will not transmute into the ichor of poetry. It is women almost alone who ever utter the poignancy of rejected love; in them it is tragic, unreflecting, unconsolable, and merciless; while something of his own elastic buoyancy of intellect, his supple optimism, his analytic, dissipating fancy, infused itself into his portrayal of the grief-pangs of his own sex. This distinction is very apparent in the group of lyrics which deal with the less complete divisions of love. An almost oppressive intensity of womanhood pulses in *A Woman's Last Word*, *In a Year*, and *Any Wife to Any Husband:* the first, with its depth of self-abasement and its cloying lilting melody, trembles, exquisite as it is, on the verge of the "sentimental." There is a rarer, subtler pathos in *Two in the Campagna.* The outward scene finds its way to his senses, and its images make a language for his mood, or else they break sharply across it and sting it to a cry. He feels the Campagna about him, with its tranced immensity lying bare to heaven:—

> "Silence and passion, joy and peace,
>   An everlasting wash of air— . . .
> Such life here, through such length of hours,
>   Such miracles performed in play,
> Such primal naked forms of flowers,
>   Such letting nature have her way
> While heaven looks from its towers;"

and in the presence of that large sincerity of nature he would fain also "be unashamed of soul" and probe love's wound to the core. But the invisible barriers will not be put aside or transcended, and in the midst of that "infinite passion" there remain "the finite hearts that yearn." Or else he wakes after the quarrel in the blitheness of a bright dawn:—

"All is blue again
After last night's rain,
And the South dries the hawthorn spray.
Only, my love's away!
I'd as lief that the blue were grey."

The disasters of love rarely, with Browning, stir us very deeply. His temperament was too elastic, his intellect too resourceful, to enter save by artificial processes into the mood of blank and hopeless grief. Tragedy did not lie in his blood, and fortune—kinder to the man than to the poet—had as yet denied him, in love, the "baptism of sorrow" which has wrung immortal verse from the lips of frailer men. It may even be questioned whether all Browning's poetry of love's tragedy will live as long as a few stanzas of Musset's *Nuits*,—bare, unadorned verses, devoid of fancy or wit, but intense and penetrating as a cry:—

"Ce soir encor je t'ai vu m'apparaître,
C'était par une triste nuit.
L'aile des vents battait à ma fenêtre;
J'étais seul, courbé sur mon lit.
J'y regardais une place chérie,
Tiède encor d'un baiser brûlant;
Et je songeais comme la femme oublie,
Et je sentais un lambeau de ma vie,
Qui se déchirait lentement.

Je rassemblais des lettres de la veille,
  Des cheveux, des débris d'amour.
Tout ce passé me criait à l'oreille
  Ses éternels serments d'un jour.
Je contemplais ces réliques sacrées,
  Qui me faisaient trembler la main :
Larmes du cœur par le cœur devorées,
Et que les yeux qui les avaient pleurées
  Ne reconnaîtront plus demain !"[1]

The same quest of the problematic which attracted Browning to the poetry of passion repelled or unrequited made him a curious student also of fainter and feebler "wars of love" — embryonic or simulated forms of passion which stood still farther from his personal experience. *A Light Woman*, *A Pretty Woman*, and *Another Way of Love* are refined studies in this world of half tones. But the most important and individual poem of this group is *The Statue and the Bust*, an excellent example of the union in Browning of the Romantic temper with a peculiar mastery of everything in human nature which traverses and repudiates Romance. The duke and the lady are simpler and slighter Hamlets— Hamlets who have no agonies of self-questioning and self-reproach; intervening in the long pageant of the famous lovers of romantic tradition with the same disturbing shock as he in the bead-roll of heroic avengers. The poet's indignant denunciation of his lovers at the close, apparently for not violating the vows of marriage, is puzzling to readers who do not appreciate the extreme subtlety of Browning's use of figure. He was at once too much and too little of a casuist,—too habituated to fine distinctions and too unaware of the pitfalls they often present to others,—to understand that in condemning his lovers for wanting the energy to commit a crime he could be supposed to imply approval of the crime they failed to commit.

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[1] Musset, *Nuit de décembre*.

Lastly, in the outer periphery of his love poetry belong his rare and fugitive "dreams" of love. *Women and Roses* has an intoxicating swiftness and buoyancy of music. But there is another and more sinister kind of love-dream—the dream of an unloved woman. Such a dream, with its tragic disillusion, Browning painted in his poignant and original *In a Balcony*. It is in no sense a drama, but a dramatic incident in three scenes, affecting the fates of three persons, upon whom the entire interest is concentrated. The three vivid and impressive character-heads stand out with intense and minute brilliance from a background absolutely blank and void. Though the scene is laid in a court and the heroine is a queen, there is no bustle of political intrigue, no conflict between the rival attractions of love and power, as in *Colombe's Birthday*. Love is the absorbing preoccupation of this society, the ultimate ground of all undertakings. There is vague talk of diplomatic victories, of dominions annexed, of public thanksgivings; but the statesman who has achieved all this did it all to win the hand of a girl, and the aged queen whom he has so successfully served has secretly dreamed all the time, though already wedded, of being his. For a brilliant young minister to fail to make love to his sovereign, in spite of her grey hairs and the marriage law, is a kind of high treason. In its social presuppositions this community belongs to a world as visionary as the mystic dream-politics of M. Maeterlinck. But, those presuppositions granted, everything in it has the uncompromising clearness and persuasive reality that Browning invariably communicates to his dreams. The three figures who in a few hours taste the height of ecstasy and then the bitterness of disillusion or severance, are drawn with remarkable psychologic force and truth. For all three love is the absorbing passion, the most real thing in life, scornfully contrasted with the reflected joys of the painter or the poet. Norbert's noble integrity is of a kind which mingles in duplicity and intrigue with disastrous results; he is too invincibly true to himself easily to act a part; but he can control the secret hunger of his heart and give no sign, until the consummate hour arrives when he may

"resume
Life after death (it is no less than life,
After such long unlovely labouring days)
And liberate to beauty life's great need
O' the beautiful, which, while it prompted work,
Suppress'd itself erewhile."

In the ecstasy of release from that suppression, every tree and flower seems to be an embodiment of the harmonious freedom he had so long foregone, as Wordsworth, chafing under his unchartered freedom, saw everywhere the willing submission to Duty. Even

> "These statues round us stand abrupt, distinct,
> The strong in strength, the weak in weakness fixed,
> The Muse for ever wedded to her lyre,
> Nymph to her fawn, and Silence to her rose:
> See God's approval on his universe!
> Let us do so—aspire to live as these
> In harmony with truth, ourselves being true!"

But it is the two women who attract Browning's most powerful handling. One of them, the Queen, has hardly her like for pity and dread. A "lavish soul" long starved, but kindling into the ecstasy of girlhood at the seeming touch of love; then, as her dream is shattered by the indignant honesty of Norbert, transmuted at once into the dæmonic Gudrun or Brynhild, glaring in speechless white-heat and implacable frenzy upon the man who has scorned her proffered heart and the hapless girl he has chosen.[1] Between these powerful, rigid, and simple natures stands Constance, ardent as they, but with the lithe and palpitating ardour of a flame. She is concentrated Romance. Her love is an intense emotion; but some of its fascination lies in its secrecy,—

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[1] An anecdote to which Prof. Dowden has lately called attention (*Browning*, p. 66) describes Browning in his last years as demurring to the current interpretation of the *dénoûment*. Some one had remarked that it was "a natural sequence that the guard should be heard coming to take Norbert to his doom." "'Now I don't quite think that,' answered Browning, *as if he were following out the play as a spectator*. 'The queen has a large and passionate temperament. . . . She would have died by a knife in her heart. The guard would have come to carry away her dead body.'" The catastrophe here suggested is undoubtedly far finer tragedy. But we cannot believe that this was what Browning originally meant to happen. That Norbert and Constance expect "doom" is obvious, and the queen's parting "glare" leaves the reader in no doubt that

> "Complots inscrutable, deep telegraphs,
> Long-planned chance meetings, hazards of a look";

she shrinks from a confession which "at the best" will deprive their love of its spice of danger and make them even as their "five hundred openly happy friends." She loves adventure, ruse, and stratagem for their own sake. But she is also romantically generous, and because she "owes this withered woman everything," is eager to sacrifice her own hopes of happiness.

Were it not for its unique position in Browning's poetry, one might well be content with a passing tribute to the great love canticle which closes *Men and Women* —the crown, as it is in a pregnant sense the nucleus, of the whole. But here, for "once, and only once, and for one only," not only the dramatic instinct, which habitually coloured all his speech, but the reticence which so hardly permitted it to disclose his most intimate personal emotion, were deliberately overcome—overcome, however, only in order, as it were, to explain and justify their more habitual sway. All the poetry in it is reached

they are right. They may, nevertheless, be wrong; but what, then, is meant by the coming of the guard, and the throwing open of the doors? The queen has in any case not died on the stage, for she had left it; and if she died outside, how should they have come "to carry away her dead body"?

through the endeavour to find speaking symbols for a love that cannot be told. The poet is a high priest, entering with awed steps the sanctuary which even he cannot tread without desecration save after divesting himself of all that is habitual and of routine,—even the habits of his genius and the routine of his art. Unable to divest himself of his poetry altogether, for he has no other art, he lays aside his habitual dramatic guise to speak, for once, not as Lippo, Roland, or Andrea, but "in his true person." And he strips off the veil of his art and speaks in his own person only to declare that speech is needless, and to fall upon that exquisite symbol of an esoteric love uncommunicated and incommunicable to the apprehension of the world,—the moon's other face with all its "silent silver lights and darks," undreamed of by any mortal. "Heaven's gift takes man's abatement," and poetry itself may only hint at the divinity of perfect love. The *One Word More* was written in September 1855, shortly before the publication of the volume it closed, as the old moon waned over the London roofs. Less than six years later the "moon of poets" had passed for ever from his ken.

CHAPTER V.

LONDON. *DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.*

Ah, Love! but a day
And the world has changed!
The sun's away,
And the bird estranged.
—*James Lee's Wife.*

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.
—*Epilogue.*

THE catastrophe of June 29, 1861, closed with appalling suddenness the fifteen years' married life of Browning. "I shall grow still, I hope," he wrote to Miss Haworth, a month later, "but my root is taken, and remains." The words vividly express the valour in the midst of desolation which animated one little tried hitherto by sorrow. The Italian home was shattered, and no thought of even attempting a patched-up existence in its ruined walls seems to have occurred to him; even the neighbourhood of the spot in which all that was mortal of her had been laid had no power to detain him. But his departure was no mere flight from scenes intolerably dear. He had their child to educate and his own life to fulfil, and he set himself with grim resolution to the work, as one who had indeed *had everything*, but who was as little inclined to abandon himself to the past as to forget it. After visiting his father in Paris—the "dear *nonno*" of his wife's charming letters[1]—he settled in London, at first in lodgings, then at the house in Warwick Crescent which was for a quarter of a century to be his home. Something of that dreary first winter found its way, ten years later, through whatever dramatic disguise, into the poignant epilogue of *Fifine*. Browning had been that "Householder," had gone through the dragging days and nights,—

> "All the fuss and trouble of street-sounds, window-sights,
> All the worry of flapping door and echoing roof; and then
> All the fancies,"—

perhaps, among them, that of the "knock, call, cry," and the pang and rapture of the visionary meeting. Certainly one of the effects of his loss was to accentuate the mood of savage isolation which lurked beneath Browning's genial sociality. The world from which his saint had been snatched looked very common, sordid, and mean, and he resented its intrusiveness on occasion with startling violence. When proposals were made in 1863 in various quarters to publish her life, he turned like a wild beast upon the "blackguards" who "thrust their paws into his bowels" by prying into his intimacies.

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[1] His father beautifully said of Mrs Browning's portrait that it was a face which made the worship of saints seem possible.

To the last he dismissed similar proposals by critics of the highest status with a cavalier bluntness highly surprising to persons who only knew him as the man of punctilious observance and fastidious good form. For the rest, London contained much that was bound by degrees to temper the gloom and assuage the hostility. Florence and Rome could furnish nothing like the circle of men of genius and varied accomplishment, using like himself the language of Shakespeare and Milton, in which he presently began to move as an intimate. Thackeray, Ruskin, Tennyson, Carlyle, Rossetti, Leighton, Woolner, Prinsep, and many more, added a kind of richness to his life which during the last fifteen years he had only enjoyed at intervals. And the flock of old friends who accepted Browning began to be reinforced by a crowd of unknown readers who proclaimed him. Tennyson was his loyal comrade; but the prestige of Tennyson's popularity had certainly blocked many of the avenues of Browning's fame, appealing as the Laureate largely did to tastes in poetry which Browning rudely traversed or ignored. On the Tennysonian reader *pur sang* Browning's work was pretty sure to make the impression so frankly described by Frederick Tennyson to his brother, of "Chinese puzzles, trackless labyrinths, unapproachable nebulosities." Even among these intimates of his own generation were doubtless some who, with F. Tennyson again, believed him to be "a man of infinite learning, jest, and bonhomie, and a sterling heart that reverbs no hollowness," but who yet held "his school of poetry" to be "the most grotesque conceivable." This was the tone of the 'Fifties, when Tennyson's vogue was at its height. But with the 'Sixties there began to emerge a critical disposition to look beyond the trim pleasances of the Early Victorians to more daring romantic adventure in search of the truth that lies in beauty, and more fearless grip of the beauty that lies in truth. The genius of the pre-Raphaelites began to find response. And so did the yet richer and more composite genius of Browning. Moreover, the immense vogue won by the poetry of his wife undoubtedly prepared the way for his more difficult but kindred work. If *Pippa Passes* counts for something in *Aurora Leigh*, *Aurora Leigh* in its turn trained the future readers of *The Ring and the Book.*

The altered situation became apparent on the publication, in rapid succession, in 1864, of Browning's *Dramatis Personæ* and Mr Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon.* Both volumes found their most enthusiastic readers at the universities. "All my new cultivators are young men," Browning wrote to Miss Blagden; adding, with a touch of malicious humour, "more than that, I observe that some of my old friends don't like at all the irruption of outsiders who rescue me from their sober and private approval, and take those words out of their mouths which they 'always meant to say,' and never did." The volume included practically all that Browning had actually written since 1855,—less than a score of pieces,—the somewhat slender harves of nine years. But during these later years in Italy, as we have seen, he had done little at his art; and after his return much time had been occupied in projecting the great scheme of that which figures in his familiar letters as his "murder-poem," and was ultimately known as *The Ring and the Book.* As a whole, the *Dramatis Personæ* stands yet more clearly apart from *Men and Women* than that does from all that had gone before. Both books contain some of his most magnificent work; but the earlier is full of summer light and glow, the later breathes the hectic and poignant splendour of autumn. The sense of tragic loss broods over all its music. In lyric strength and beauty there is no decay; but the dramatic imagination has certainly lost somewhat of its flexible strength and easy poise of wing: falling back now upon the personal convictions of the poet, now upon the bald prose of daily life. *Rabbi ben Ezra* and *Abt Vogler*, *A Death in the Desert*, are as noble poetry as *Andrea del Sarto* or *The Grammarian's Funeral;* but it is a poetry less charged with the "incidents" of any other soul than his own; and, on the other hand, *Dis Aliter Visum* and *Youth and Art*, and others, effective as they are, yet move in an atmosphere less remote from prose than any of the songs and lays of love which form one of the chief glories of *Men and Women.* The world which is neither thrillingly beautiful nor grotesquely ugly, but simply poor, unendowed, humdrum, finds for the first time a place in his poetry. Its blankness answered too well to the desolate regard which in the early 'Sixties he turned upon life. The women are homely, even plain, like James Lee's wife, with her "coarse hands and hair," and Edith in *Too Late*, with her thin, odd features, or mediocre, like the speaker in *Dis Aliter Visum;* and they have homely names, like "Lee" or "Lamb" or "Brown," not gratuitously grotesque ones like Blougram, Blouphocks, or the outrageous "Gigadibs." "Sludge" stands on a different footing; for it is dramatically expressive, as these are not. The legend of the gold-haired maiden of Pornic is told with a touch of harsher cynicism than was heard in Galuppi's "chill" music of the vanished beauties of Venice. If we may by no means say that the glory of humanity has faded for Browning, yet its glory has become more fugitive and more extrinsic,—a "grace not theirs" brought by love "settling unawares" upon minds "level and low, burnt and bare" in themselves. And he dwells now on desolate and desert scenes with a new persistence, just as it was wild primitive nooks of the French coast which now became his chosen summer resorts in place of the semi-civic rusticity which had been his choice in Italy. "This is a wild little place in Brittany," he wrote to Miss Blagden in August 1863; "close to the sea, a hamlet of a dozen houses, perfectly lonely—one may walk on the edge of the low rocks by the sea for miles. . . . If I could I would stay just as I am for many a day. I feel out of the very earth sometimes as I sit here at the window." The wild coast scenery falls in with the desolate mood of James Lee's wife; the savage luxuriance of the Isle with the primitive fancies of

Caliban; the arid desert holds in its embrace, like an oasis, the well-spring of Love which flows from the lips of the dying Apostle. In the poetry of *Men and Women* we see the ripe corn and the flowers in bloom; in *Dramatis Personæ* the processes of Nature are less spontaneous and, as it were, less complete; the desert and the abounding streams, the unreclaimed human nature and the fertilising grace of love, emerge in a nearer approach to elemental nakedness, and there are moods in which each appears to dominate. Doubtless the mood which finally triumphed was that of the dying John and of the Third Speaker; but it was a triumph no longer won by "the happy prompt instinctive way of youth," and the way to it lay through moods not unlike those of James Lee's wife, whose problem, like his own, was how to live when the answering love was gone. His "fire," like hers, was made "of shipwreck wood,"[1] and her words "at the window" can only be an echo of his—

"Ah, Love! but a day
  And the world has changed!
The sun's away,
  And the bird estranged;
The wind has dropped,
  And the sky's deranged:
Summer has stopped."

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[1] The second section of *James Lee's Wife*, *By the Fireside*, cannot have been written without a conscious, and therefore a purposed and significant, reference to the like-named poem in *Men and Women*, which so exquisitely plays with the intimate scenery of his home-life.

As her problem is another life-setting of his, so she feels her way towards its solution through processes which cannot have been strange to him. She walks "along the Beach," or "on the Cliff," or "among the rocks," and the voices of sea and wind ("Such a soft sea and such a mournful wind!" he wrote to Miss Blagden) become speaking symbols in her preoccupied mind. Not at all, however, in the fashion of the "pathetic fallacy." She is too deeply disenchanted to imagine pity; and Browning puts into her mouth (part vi.) a significant criticism of some early stanzas of his own, in which he had in a buoyant optimistic fashion interpreted the wailing of the wind.[1] If Nature has aught to teach, it is the sterner doctrine, that nothing endures; that Love, like the genial sunlight, has to glorify base things, to raise the low nature by its throes, sometimes divining the hidden spark of God in what seemed mere earth, sometimes only lending its transient splendour to a dead and barren spirit,—the fiery grace of a butterfly momentarily obliterating the dull turf or rock it lights on, but leaving them precisely what they were.

James Lee's Wife is a type of the other idyls of love which form so large a part of the *Dramatis Personæ*. The note of dissonance, of loss, which they sound had been struck by Browning before, but never with the same persistence and iteration. The *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Men and Women* are not quite silent of the tragic failure of love; but it is touched lightly in "swallow flights of song," like the *Lost Mistress*, that "dip their wings in tears and skim away." And the lovers are spiritual athletes, who can live on the memory of a look, and seem to be only irradiated, not scorched, by the tragic flame. But these lovers of the 'Sixties are of less ætherial temper; they are more obviously, familiarly human; the loss of what they love comes home to them, and there is agony in the purifying fire. Such are the wronged husband in *The Worst of It*, and the finally frustrated lover in *Too Late.* In the group of "Might-have-been" lyrics the sense of loss is less poignant and tragic but equally uncompensated. "You fool!" cries the homely little heroine of *Dis Aliter Visum* to the elderly scholar who ten years before had failed to propose to her,—

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[1] Cf. *supra*, p. 16.

> "You fool for all your lore! . . .
> The devil laughed at you in his sleeve!
> You knew not? That I well believe;
> Or you had saved two souls;—nay, four."

Nor is there much of the glory of failure in Kate Brown's bitter smile, as she sums up the story of Youth and Art:—

> "Each life unfulfilled, you see;
> It hangs still, patchy and scrappy,
> We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
> Starved, feasted, despaired,—been happy."

It is no accident that with the clearer recognition of sharp and absolute loss Browning shows increasing preoccupation with the thought of recovery after death. For himself death was now inseparably intertwined with all that he had known of love, and the prospect of the supreme reunion which death, as he believed, was to bring him, drew it nearer to the core of his imagination and passion. Not that he looked forward to it with the easy complacency of the hymn-writer. *Prospice* would not be the great uplifting song it is were the note of struggle, of heroic heart to bear the brunt and pay in one moment all "life's arrears of pain, darkness, and cold," less clearly sounded; and were the final cry less intense with the longing of bereavement. How near this thought of rapturous reunion lay to the springs of Browning's imagination at this time, how instantly it leapt into poetry, may be seen from the *Eurydice to Orpheus* which he fitly placed immediately after these—

> "But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow!
> Let them once more absorb me!"

But in two well-known poems of the *Dramatis Personæ* Browning has splendidly unfolded what is implicit in the strong simple clarion-note of *Prospice*. *Abt Vogler* and *Rabbi ben Ezra* are among the surest strongholds of his popular fame. *Rabbi ben Ezra* is a great song of life, bearing more fully perhaps than any other poem the burden of what he had to say to his generation, but lifted far above mere didacticism by the sustained glow in which ethical passion, and its imaginative splendour, indistinguishably blend. It is not for nothing that Browning put this loftiest utterance of all that was most strenuous in his own faith into the mouth of a member of the race which has beyond others known how to suffer and how to transfigure its suffering. Ben Ezra's thoughts are not all Hebraic, but they are conceived in the most exalted temper of Hebrew prophecy; blending the calm of achieved wisdom with the fervour of eagerly accepted discipline, imperious scorn for the ignorance of fools, and heroic ardour for the pangs and throes of the fray. Ideals which, coolly analysed, seem antithetical, and which have in reality inspired opposite ways of life, meet in the fusing flame of the Rabbi's impassioned thought: the body is the soul's beguiling sorceress, but also its helpful comrade; man is the passive clay which the great Potter moulded and modelled upon the Wheel of Time, and yet is bidden rage and strive, the adoring acquiescence of Eastern Fatalism mingling with the Western gospel of individual energy. And all this complex and manifold ethical appeal is conveyed in verse of magnificent volume and resonance, effacing by the swift recurrent anvil crash of its rhythm any suggestion that the acquiescence of the "clay" means passivity.

In *Abt Vogler* the prophetic strain is even more daring and assured; only it springs not from "old experience," but from the lonely ecstasy of artistic creation. Browning has put into the mouth of his old Catholic musician the most impassioned and undoubting assertion to be found in his work of his faith that nothing good is finally lost. The Abbé's theology may have supplied the substance of the doctrine, but it could not supply the beautiful, if daring, expansion of it by which the immortality of men's souls is extended to "all we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good." This was the work of music; and the poem is in truth less remarkable for this rapturous statement of faith than for the penetrating power with which the mystical and transcendental suggestions of music are explored and unfolded, — the mysterious avenues which it seems to open to kinds of experience more universal than ours, exempt from the limitations of our narrow faculties, even from the limitations of time and space themselves. All that is doctrinal and speculative in *Abt Vogler* is rooted in musical experience,—the musical experience, no doubt, of a richly imaginative mind, for which every organ-note turns into the symbol of a high romance, till he sees heaven itself yearning down to meet his passion as it seeks the sky. Of the doctrine and speculation we may think as we will; of the psychological force and truth of the whole presentment there can be as little question as of its splendour and glow. It has the sinew, as well as the wing, of poetry. And neither in poetry nor in prose has the elementary marvel of the simplest musical form been more vividly seized than in the well-known couplet—

> "I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man
> That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but
> a star."

A Death in the Desert, though a poem of great beauty, must be set, in intrinsic value, below these two. To attack Strauss through the mouth of the dying apostle was a smart pamphleteering device; but it gave his otherwise noble verse a disagreeable twang of theological disputation, and did no manner of harm to Strauss, who had to be met on other ground and with other weapons,—the weapons of history and comparative religion—in which Browning's skill was that only of a brilliant amateur. But the impulse which created it had deeper springs than this. What is most clearly personal and most deeply felt in it is the exaltation of love, which seems to have determined the whole imaginative fabric. Love, Browning's highest expression of spiritual vitality, was the cardinal principle of his creed; God was vital to him only as a loving God, and Christ only as the human embodiment and witness of God's love. The traditional story of Christ was in this sense of profound significance for him, while he turned away with indifference or disgust from the whole doctrinal apparatus of the Atonement, which, however closely bound up with the popular conception of God's love, had nothing to do with his conception of it, and he could thus consistently decline the name of Christian, as some witnesses aver that he did.[1] It was thus in entire keeping with his way of approaching Christianity that he imagined this moving episode,—the dying apostle whose genius had made that way so singularly persuasive, the little remnant of doomed and hunted fugitives who seem to belong to earth only by the spiritual bond of their love to him, as his own physical life is now a firebrand all but extinct,—"all ashes save the tip that holds a spark," but that still glowing with undiminished soul. The material fabric which enshrines this fine essence of the Christian spirit is of the frailest; and the contrast is carried out in the scenic setting,—the dim cool cavern, with its shadowy depth and faint glimmerings of day, the hushed voices, the ragged herbage, and the glory in the face of the passing saint within; without, the hard dazzling glare of the desert noon, and the burning blue, and the implacable and triumphant might of Rome.

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[1] Other testimony, it is true, equally strong, asserts that he accepted the name; in any case he used it in a sense of his own.

The discourse of the "aged friend" is full of subtle and vivid thinking, and contains some of Browning's most memorable utterances about Love, in particular the noble lines—

> "For life with all it yields of joy and woe . . .
> Is just our chance of the prize of learning love,
> How love might be, hath been indeed, and is."

Nowhere, either, do we see more clearly how this master-conception of his won control of his reasoning powers, framing specious ladders to conclusions towards which his whole nature yearned, but which his vision of the world did not uniformly bear out. Man loved, and God would not be above man if He did not also love. The horrible spectre of a God who has power without love never ceased to lurk in the background of Browning's thought, and he strove with all his resources of dialectic and poetry to exorcise it. And no wonder. For a loving God was the very keystone of Browning's scheme of life and of the world, and its withdrawal would have meant for him the collapse of the whole structure.

It is no accident that the *Death in the Desert* is followed immediately by a theological study in a very different key, *Caliban upon Setebos*. For in this brilliantly original "dramatic monologue" Caliban — the "savage man"—appears "mooting the point 'What is God?'" and constructing his answer frankly from his own nature. It was quite in Browning's way to take a humorous delight in imagining grotesque parallels to ideas and processes in which he profoundly believed; a proclivity aided by the curious subtle relation between his grotesquerie and his seriousness, which makes *Pacchiarotto*, for instance, closely similar in effect to parts of *Christmas-Eve*. Browning is one of three or four sons of the nineteenth century who dared to fill in the outlines, or to complete the half-told tale, of Shakespeare's Caliban.[1] Renan's hero is the quondam disciple of Stephano and Trinculo, finished and matured in the corrupt mob-politics of Europe; a caustic symbol of democracy, as Renan saw it, alternately trampling on and patronising culture. Browning's Caliban is far truer to Shakespeare's conception; he is the Caliban of Shakespeare, not followed into a new phase but observed in a different attitude,—Caliban of the days before the Storm, an unsophisticated creature of the island, inaccessible to the wisdom of Europe, and not yet the dupe of its vice. His wisdom, his science, his arts, are all his own. He anticipates the heady joy of Stephano's bottle with a mash of gourds of his own invention. And his religion too is his own, —no decoction from any of the recognised vintages of religious thought, but a home-made brew cunningly distilled from the teeming animal and plant life of the Island. It is a mistake to call Caliban's theology a study of primitive religion; for primitive religion is inseparable from the primitive tribe, and Caliban the savage, who has never known society, was a conception as unhistorical as it was exquisitely adapted to the individualist ways of Browning's imagination. Tradition and prescription, which fetter the savage with iron bonds, exist for Caliban only in the form of the faith held by his dam, which he puts aside in the calm decisive way of a modern thinker, as one who has nothing to fear from the penalties of heresy, and has even outlived the exultation of free thought:—

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[1] It is characteristic that M. Maeterlinck found no place for Caliban in his striking fantasia on the *Tempest*, *Joyzelle*.

> "His dam held that the Quiet made all things
> Which Setebos vexed only: 'holds not so;
> Who made them weak, made weakness He might vex."

Caliban's theology has, moreover, very real points of contact with Browning's own. His god is that sheer Power which Browning from the first recognised; it is because Setebos feels heat and cold, and is therefore a weak creature with ungratified wants, that Caliban decides there must be behind him a divinity that "all it hath a mind to, doth." Caliban is one of Browning's most consummate realists; he has the remorselessly vivid perceptions of a Lippo Lippi and a Sludge. Browning's wealth of recondite animal and plant lore is nowhere else so amazingly displayed; the very character of beast or bird will be hit off in a line,—as the pie with the long tongue

> "That pricks deep into oakwarts for a worm,
> And says a plain word when she finds her prize,"

or the lumpish sea-beast which he blinded and called Caliban (an admirable trait)—

> "A bitter heart that bides its time and bites."

And all this curious scrutiny is reflected in Caliban's god. The sudden catastrophe at the close

> ("What, what? A curtain o'er the world at once!")

is one of Browning's most superb surprises, breaking in upon the leisured ease of theory with the suddenness of a horrible practical emergency, and compelling Caliban, in the act of repudiating his theology, to provide its most vivid illustration.

Shakespeare, with bitter irony, brought his half-taught savage into touch with the scum of modern civilisation, and made them conspire together against its benignity and wisdom. The reader is apt to remember this conjunction when he passes from *Caliban* to *Mr Sludge*. Stephano and Trinculo, almost alone among Shakespeare's rascals, are drawn without geniality, and Sludge is the only one of Browning's "casuists" whom he treats with open scorn. That some of the effects were palpably fraudulent, and that, fraud apart, there remained a residuum of phenomena not easy to explain, were all irritating facts. Yet no one can mistake *Sludge* for an outflow of personal irritation, still less for an act of literary vengeance upon the impostor who had beguiled the lofty and ardent intelligence of his wife. The resentful husband is possibly there, but so elementary an emotion could not possibly have taken exclusive possession of Browning's complex literary faculty, or baulked the eager speculative curiosity which he brought to all new and problematic modes of mind. His attitude towards spiritualism was in fact the product of strangely mingled conditions. Himself the most convinced believer in spirit among the poets of his time, he regarded the bogus demonstrations of the "spiritualist" somewhat as the intellectual sceptic regards the shoddy logic by which the vulgar unbeliever proves there is no God. But even this anger had no secure tenure in a nature so rich in solvents for disdain. It is hard to say where scorn ends and sympathy begins, or where the indignation of the believer who sees his religion travestied passes over into the curious interest of the believer who recognises its dim distorted reflection in the unlikeliest quarters. But Sludge is clearly permitted, like Blougram before and

Juan and Hohenstiel-Schwangau after him, to assume in good faith positions, or at least to use, with perfect sincerity, language, which had points of contact with Browning's own. He has an eye for "spiritual facts" none the less genuine in its gross way that it has been acquired in the course of professional training, and is valued as a professional asset. But his supernaturalism at its best is devoid of spiritual quality. His "spiritual facts" are collections of miraculous coincidences raked together by the anteater's tongue of a cool egoist, who waits for them

"lazily alive,
Open-mouthed, . . .
Letting all nature's loosely guarded motes
Settle and, slick, be swallowed."

Like Caliban, who also finds the anteater an instructive symbol, he sees "the supernatural" everywhere, and everywhere concerned with himself. But Caliban's religion of terror, cunning, and cajolery is more estimable than Sludge's business-like faith in the virtue of wares for which he finds so profitable a market, and which he gets on such easy terms. Caliban tremblingly does his best to hitch his waggon to Setebos's star—when Setebos is looking; Sludge is convinced that the stars are once for all hitched to his waggon; that heaven is occupied in catering for his appetite and becoming an accomplice in his sins. Sludge's spiritual world was genuine for him, but it had nothing but the name in common with that of the poet of Ben Ezra, and of the *Epilogue* which immediately follows.[1]

This *Epilogue* is one of the few utterances in which Browning draws the ambiguous dramatic veil from his personal faith. That he should choose this moment of parting with the reader for such a confession confirms one's impression that the focus of his interest in poetry now, more than ever before, lay among those problems of life and death, of God and man, to which nearly all the finest work of this collection is devoted. Far more emphatically than in the analogous *Christmas-Eve*, Browning resolves not only the negations of critical scholarship but the dogmatic affirmations of the Churches into symptoms of immaturity in the understanding of spiritual things; in the knowledge how heaven's high with earth's low should intertwine. The third speaker voices the manifold protest of the nineteenth century against all theologies built upon an aloofness of the divine and human, whether the aloof God could be reached by special processes and ceremonies, or whether he was a bare abstraction, whose

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[1] The foregoing account assumes that the poem was not written, as is commonly supposed, in Florence in 1859-60, but after his settlement in London. The only ground for the current view is Mrs Browning's mention of his having been "working at a long poem" that winter (*Letters*, May 18, 1860). I am enabled, by the kindness of Prof. Hall Griffin, to state that an unpublished letter from Browning to Buchanan in 1871 shows this "long poem" to have been one on Napoleon III. (cf. above, p. 90). Some of it probably appears in *Hohenstiel Schwangau.*

"pale bliss" never thrilled in response to human hearts. The best comment upon his faith is the saying of Meredith, "The fact that character can be and is developed by the clash of circumstances is to me a warrant for infinite hope."[1] Only, for Browning, that "infinite hope" translates itself into a sense of present divine energies bending all the clashing circumstance to its benign end, till the walls of the world take on the semblance of the shattered Temple, and the crowded life within them the semblance of the seemingly vanished Face, which

> "far from vanish, rather grows,
> Or decomposes but to recompose,
> Become my universe that feels and knows."[2]

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[1] Quoted *Int. Journ. of Ethics*, April 1902.

[2] The last line is pantheistic in expression, and has been so understood by some, particularly by Mr J. M. Robertson. But pantheism was at most a tendency, which the stubborn concreteness of his mind held effectually in check ; a point, one might say, upon which his thinking converges, but which it never even proximately attains. God and the Soul never mingle, however intimate their communion. Cf. chap. x. below.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RING AND THE BOOK.

Tout passe.—L'art robuste
Seul a l'éternité.
        Le buste
Survit à la cité.
Et la médaille austère
Que trouve un laboureur
        Sous terre
Révèle un empereur.
—GAUTIER: *L'Art.*

AFTER four years of silence, the *Dramatis Personæ* was followed by *The Ring and the Book.* This monumental poem, in some respects his culminating achievement, has its roots in an earlier stratum of his life than its predecessor. There is little here to recall the characteristic moods of his first years of desolate widowhood—the valiant Stoicism, the acceptance of the sombre present, the great forward gaze upon the world beyond. We are in Italy once more, our senses tingle with its glowing prodigality of day, we jostle the teeming throng of the Roman streets, and are drawn into the vortex of a vast debate which seems to occupy the entire community, and which turns, not upon immortality, or spiritualism, or the nature of God, or the fate of man, but on the guilt or innocence of the actors in one pitiful drama,—a priest, a noble, an illiterate girl.

With the analytic exuberance of one to whom the processes of Art were yet more fascinating than its products, Browning has described how he discovered this forgotten tale and forged its glowing metal into the *Ring*. The chance finding of an "old square yellow book" which aroused his curiosity among the frippery of a Florentine stall, was as grotesquely casual an inception as poem ever had. But it was one of those accidents which, suddenly befalling a creative mind, organise its loose and scattered material with a magical potency unattainable by prolonged cogitation. The story of Pompilia took shape in the gloom and glare of a stormy Italian night of June 1860, as he watched from the balcony of Casa Guidi. The patient elaboration of after-years wrought into consummate expressiveness the *donnée* of that hour. But the conditions under which the elaboration was carried out were pathetically unlike those of the primal vision. Before the end of June in the following year Mrs Browning died, and Browning presently left Florence for ever. For the moment all the springs of poetry were dried up, and it is credible enough that, as Mrs Orr says, Browning abandoned all thought of a poem, and even handed over his material to another. But within a few months, it is clear, the story of Pompilia not merely recovered its hold upon his imagination, but gathered a subtle hallowing association with what was most spiritual in that vanished past of which it was the last and most brilliant gift. The poem which enshrined Pompilia was thus instinct with reminiscence; it was, with all its abounding vitality, yet commemorative and memorial; and we understand how Browning, no friend of the conventions of poetic art, entered on and closed his giant task with an invocation to the "Lyric Love," as it were the Urania, or heavenly Muse, of a modern epic.

The definite planning of the poem in its present shape belongs to the autumn of 1862. In September 1862 he wrote to Miss Blagden from Biarritz of "my new poem which is about to be, and of which the whole is pretty well in my head—the Roman murder-story, you know."[1] After the completion of the *Dramatis Personæ* in 1863-64, the "Roman murder-story" became his central occupation. To it three quiet early morning hours were daily given, and it grew steadily under his hand. For the rest he began to withdraw from his seclusion, to mix freely in society, to "live and like earth's way." He talked openly among his literary friends of the poem and its progress, rumour and speculation busied themselves with it as never before with work of his, and the literary world at large looked for its publication with eager and curious interest. At length, in November 1868, the first instalment was published. It was received by the most authoritative part of the press with outspoken, even dithyrambic eulogies, in which the severely judicial *Athenæum* took the lead. Confirmed sceptics or deriders, like Edward FitzGerald, rubbed their eyes and tried once again, in vain, to make the old barbarian's verses construe and scan. To critics trained in classical traditions the original structure of the poem was extremely disturbing; and most of FitzGerald's friends shared, according to him, the opinion of Carlyle, who roundly pronounced it "without *Backbone* or basis of Common-sense," and "among the absurdest books ever written by a gifted Man." Tennyson, however, admitted (to FitzGerald) that he "found greatness" in it,[1] and Mr Swinburne was in the forefront of the chorus of praise. The audience which now welcomed Browning was in fact substantially that which had hailed the first fresh runnels of Mr Swinburne's genius a few years before; the fame of both marked a wave of reaction from the austere simplicity and attenuated sentiment of the later *Idylls of the King*. Readers upon whom the shimmering exquisiteness of Arthurian knighthood began to pall turned with relish to Browning's

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[1] W. M. Rossetti reports Browning to have told him, in a call, March 15, 1868, that he "began it in October 1864. Was staying at Bayonne, and walked out to a mountain-gorge traditionally said to have been cut or kicked out by Roland, and there laid out the full plan of his twelve cantos, accurately carried out in the execution." The date is presumably an error of Rossetti's for 1862 (*Rossetti Papers*, p. 302). Cf. Letter of Sept. 29, 1862 (Orr, p. 259).

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[1] *More Letters* of E. F.G.

Italian murder-story, with its sensational crime, its mysterious elopement, its problem interest, its engaging actuality.

And undoubtedly this was part of the attraction of the theme for Browning himself. He had inherited his father's taste for stories of mysterious crime.[1] And to the detective's interest in probing a mystery, which seems to have been uppermost in the elder Browning, was added the pleader's interest in making out an ingenious and plausible case for each party. The casuist in him, the lover of argument as such, and the devoted student of Euripides,[2] seized with delight upon a forensic subject which made it natural to introduce the various "persons of the drama," giving their individual testimonies and "apologies." He avails himself remorselessly of all the pretexts for verbosity, for iteration, for sophistical invention, afforded by the cumbrous machinery of the law, and its proverbial delay. Every detail is examined from every point of view. Little that is sordid or revolting is suppressed. But then it is assuredly a mistake to represent, with one of the liveliest of Browning's recent exponents, that the story was for him, even at the outset, in the stage of "crude fact," merely a common and sordid tale like a hundred others, picked up "at random" from a rubbish-heap to be subjected to the alchemy of imagination by way of showing the infinite worth of "the insignificant." Rather, he thought that on that broiling June day, a providential "Hand" had "pushed" him to the discovery, in that unlikely place, of a forgotten treasure, which he forthwith pounced upon with ravishment as a "prize." He saw in it from the first something rare, something exceptional, and made wondering inquiries at Rome, where ecclesiasticism itself scarcely credited the truth of a story which told "for once clean for the Church and dead against the world, the flesh, and the devil."[1] The metal which went to the making of the *Ring*, and on which he poured his imaginative alloy, was crude and untempered, but it was gold. Its disintegrated particles gleamed obscurely, as if with a challenge to the restorative cunning of the craftsman. Above all, of course, and beyond all else, that arresting gleam lingered about the bald record of the romance of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. It was upon these two that Browning's divining imagination fastened. Their relation was the crucial point of the whole story, the point at which report stammered most lamely, and where the interpreting spirit of poetry was most needed "to abolish the death of things, deep calling unto deep." This process was itself, however, not sudden or simple. This first inspiration was superb, visionary, romantic,—in keeping with "the beauty and fearfulness of that June night" upon the terrace at Florence, where it came to him.

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[1] Cf. H. Corkran, *Celebrities and I* (R. Browning, senior), 1903.

[2] It is perhaps not without significance that in the summer sojourn when *The Ring and the Book* was planned, Euripides was, apart from that, his absorbing companion. "I have got on," he writes to Miss Blagden, "by having a great read at Euripides,—the one book I brought with me."

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[1] *Ring and the Book*, i. 437.

> "All was sure,
> Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,
> The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?
> The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,
> Quenched lay their cauldron, cowered i' the dust the crew,
> As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,
> Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest
> Bearing away the lady in his arms
> Saved for a splendid minute and no more." [1]

Such a vision might have been rendered without change in the chiselled gold and agate of the *Idylls of the King.* But Browning's hero could be no Sir Galahad; he had to be something less; and also something more. The idealism of his nature had to force its way through perplexities and errors, beguiled by the distractions and baffled by the duties of his chosen career. Born to be a lover, in Dante's great way, he had groped through life without the vision of Beatrice, seeking to satisfy his blind desire, as perhaps Dante after Beatrice's death did also, with the lower love and scorning the loveless asceticism of the monk. The Church encouraged its priest to be "a fribble and a coxcomb"; and a fribble and a coxcomb, by his own confession, Caponsacchi became. But the vanities he mingled with never quite blinded him. He walked in the garden of the Hesperides bent on great adventure, plucked in ignorance hedge-fruit and feasted to satiety, but yet he scorned the achievement, laughing at such high fame for hips and haws.[1] Then suddenly flashed upon him the apparition, in the theatre, of

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[1] *Ring and the Book*, i. 580-588.

> "A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad."

The gaze burnt to his soul, and the beautiful, sad, strange smile haunted him night and day; but their first effect was to crush and scatter all thoughts of love. The young priest found himself haunting the solemn shades of the Duomo instead of serenading countesses; vowed to write no more canzonets, and doubted much whether Marini were a better poet than Dante after all. His patron jocularly charged him with playing truant in Church all day long:—

> "'Are you turning Molinist?' I answered quick:
> 'Sir, what if I turned Christian? It might be.'"

The forged love-letters he instantly sees through. They are the scorpion-blotch feigned to issue miraculously from Madonna's mouth. And then Pompilia makes her appeal. "Take me to Rome!" The Madonna has turned her face upon him indeed, "to summon me and signify her choice," and he at once receives and accepts

> "my own fact, my miracle
> Self-authorised and self-explained,"

in the presence of which all hesitation vanished,—nay, thought itself fell back before the tide of revealing emotion :—

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[1] *Caponsacchi*, 1002 f.

> "I paced the city : it was the first Spring.
> By the invasion I lay passive to,
> In rushed new things, the old were rapt away ;
> Alike abolished—the imprisonment
> Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world
> That pulled me down."

The bonds of his old existence snapped, the former heaven and earth died for him, and that death was the beginning of life :—

> "Death meant, to spurn the ground,
> Soar to the sky,—die well and you do that.
> The very immolation made the bliss ;
> Death was the heart of life, and all the harm
> My folly had crouched to avoid, now proved a veil
> Hiding all gain my wisdom strove to grasp :
> As if the intense centre of the flame
> Should turn a heaven to that devoted fly
> Which hitherto, sophist alike and sage,
> Saint Thomas with his sober grey goose-quill,
> And sinner Plato by Cephisian reed,
> Would fain, pretending just the insect's good,
> Whisk off, drive back, consign to shade again.
> Into another state, under new rule
> I knew myself was passing swift and sure ;
> Whereof the initiatory pang approached,
> Felicitous annoy, as bitter-sweet
> As when the virgin-band, the victors chaste,
> Feel at the end the earthly garments drop,
> And rise with something of a rosy shame
> Into immortal nakedness : so I
> Lay, and let come the proper throe would thrill
> Into the ecstasy and outthrob pain."

But he presently discovered that his new task did not contravene, but only completed, the old ideal. The Church had offered her priest no alternative between the world and the cloister, — self-indulgence and self-slaughter. For ignoble passion her sole remedy was to crush passion altogether. She calls to the priest to renounce the fleshly woman and cleave to Her, the Bride who took his plighted troth; but it is a scrannel voice sighing from stone lungs:—

"Leave that live passion, come, be dead with me!"

From the exalted Pisgah of his "new state" he recognised that the true self-sacrifice, the perfect priesthood, lay by way of life, not death, that life and death

"Are means to an end, that passion uses both,
Indisputably mistress of the man
Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice."

Yet it is not this recognition, but the "passion" which ultimately determines his course. Love is, for Browning, in his maturity, deeper and more secure than thought; Caponsacchi wavers in his thinking, falls back upon the narrower conception of priesthood, persuades himself that his duty is to serve God:—

"Duty to God is duty to her: I think
God, who created her, will save her too
Some new way, by one miracle the more,
Without me."

But when once again he is confronted with the strange sad face, and hears once more the pitiful appeal, all hesitations vanish, and he sees no duty

> "Like daring try be good and true myself,
> Leaving the shows of things to the Lord of Show."

With the security of perfect innocence he flings at his judges as "the final fact"—

> "In contempt for all misapprehending ignorance
> Of the human heart, much more the mind of Christ,—
> That I assuredly did bow, was blessed
> By the revelation of Pompilia."

Thus, through all the psychologic subtlety of the portrait the groundwork of spiritual romance subsists. The militant saint of legend reappears, in the mould and garb of the modern world, subject to all its hampering conditions, and compelled to make his way over the corpses, not of lions and dragons only, but of consecrated duties and treasured instincts. And the matter-of-course chivalry of professed knighthood is as inferior in art as in ethics to the chivalry to which this priest, vowed to another service, is lifted by the vision of Pompilia.

Pompilia is herself, like her soldier saint, vowed to another service. But while he only after a struggle overcomes the apparent discrepancy between his duty as a priest and as a knight, she rises with the ease and swiftness of a perfectly pure and spiritual nature from the duty of endurance to the duty of resistance—

> "Promoted at one cry
> O' the trump of God to the new service, not
> To longer bear, but henceforth fight, be found
> Sublime in new impatience with the foe!"[1]

And she carries the same fearless simplicity into her love. Caponsacchi falters and recoils in his adorations of her, with the compunction of the voluptuary turned ascetic; he hardly dares to call his passion by a name which the vulgar will mumble and misinterpret: she, utterly unconscioms of such peril, glories in the immeasurable devotion

> "Of my one friend, my only, all my own,
> Who put his breast between the spears and me."

Pompilia is steeped in the remembrance of the poet's "Lyric Love." Remote enough this illiterate child must seem from the brilliant and accomplished Elizabeth Browning. But Browning's conception of his wife's nature had a significant affinity to his portrayal of Pompilia. She, he declared, was "the poet," taught by genius more than by experience; he himself "the clever person," effectively manipulating a comprehensive knowledge of life. Pompilia does indeed put her narrow experience to marvellous use; her blending of the infantine with the profound touches the bounds of possible consistency; but her naïve spiritual instinct is ever on the alert, and fills her with a perpetual sense of the strangeness of the things that happen, a "childlike, wondering yet subtle perception of the anomalies of life."

[1] *The Pope*, 1057.

Spiritual simplicity has received no loftier tribute than from the most opulent and complex poetic intellect of our day. He loves to bring such natures into contrast with the cunning and cleverness of the world; to show an Aprile, a David, a Pippa loosening the tangle of more complicated lives with a song. Pompilia is a sister of the same spiritual household as these. But she is a far more wonderful creation than any of them; the same exquisite rarity of soul, but unfolded under conditions more sternly real, and winning no such miraculous alacrity of response. In lyrical wealth and swiftness Browning had perhaps advanced little since the days of Pippa; but how much he had grown in Shakespearian realism is fairly measured by the contrast between that early, half-legendary lyric child, by whose unconscious alchemy the hard hearts of Asolo are suddenly turned, and this later creation, whose power over her world, though not less real, is so much more slowly and hardly achieved. Her "song" is only the ravishing "unheard melody" which breathes like incense from her inarticulate childhood. By simple force of being what she is, she turns the priest into the saint, compels a cynical society to believe in spiritual love, and wins even from the husband who bought her and hated her and slew her the confession of his last desperate cry—

"Pompilia, will you let them murder me?"

In contrast with these two, who shape their course by the light of their own souls, the authorised exponents of morality play a secondary and for the most part a sorry part. The old Pope mournfully reflects that his seven years' tillage of the garden of the Church has issued only in the "timid leaf and the uncertain bud," while the perfect flower, Pompilia, has sprung up by the wayside 'neath the foot of the enemy, "a mere chance-sown seed."

> "Where are the Christians in their panoply?
> The loins we girt about with truth, the breasts
> Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith? . . .
> Slunk into corners!"

The Aretine Archbishop, who thrust the suppliant Pompilia back upon the wolf, the Convent of Convertities, who took her in as a suffering saint, and after her death claimed her succession because she was of dishonest life, the unspeakable Abate and Canon, Guido's brothers,—it is these figures who have played the most sinister part, and the old Pope contemplates them with the "terror" of one who sees his fundamental assumptions shaken at the root. For here the theory of the Church was hard to maintain. Not only had the Church, whose mission it was to guide corrupt human nature by its divine light, only darkened and destroyed, but the saving love and faith had sprung forth at the bidding of natural promptings of the spirit, which its rule and law were to supersede.[1] The blaze of "uncommissioned meteors" had intervened where the authorised luminaries failed, and if they dazzled, it was with excess of light. Was Caponsacchi blind?

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[1] *The Pope*, 1550 f.

> "Ay, as a man should be inside the sun,
> Delirious with the plenitude of light."[1]

It is easy to imagine how so grave an indictment would have been forced home by the author of the *Cenci* had this other, less famous, "Roman murder-case" fallen into his hands. The old Godwinian virus would have found ready material in this disastrous breakdown of a great institution, this magnificent uprising of emancipated souls. Yet, though the Shelleyan affinities of Browning are here visible enough, his point of view is clearly distinct. The revolutionary animus against institutions as the sole obstacle to the native goodness of man has wholly vanished; but of historic or mystic reverence for them he has not a trace. He parts company with Rousseau without showing the smallest affinity to Burke. As sources of moral and spiritual growth the State and the Church do not count. Training and discipline have their relative worth, but the spirit bloweth where it listeth, and the heights of moral achievement are won by those alone in whom it breathes the heroism of aspiration and resolve. His idealists grow for the most part in the interstices of the social organism. He recognises them, it is true, without difficulty even in the most central and responsible organs of government. None of his unofficial heroes—

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[1] *The Pope*, 1563.

Paracelsus or Sordello or Rabbi ben Ezra—has a deeper moral insight than the aged Pope. But the Pope's impressiveness for Browning and for his readers lies just in his complete emancipation from the bias of his office. He faces the task of judgment, not as an infallible priest, but as a man, whose wisdom, like other men's, depends upon the measure of his God-given judgment, and flags with years. His "grey ultimate decrepitude" is fallible, Pope though he be; and he naïvely submits the verdict it has framed to the judgment of his former self, the vigorous, but yet uncrowned, worker in the world. This summing-up of the case is in effect the poet's own, and is rich in the familiar prepossessions of Browning's individualist and unecclesiastical mind. He vindicates Caponsacchi more in the spirit of an antique Roman than of a Christian; he has open ears for the wisdom of the pagan world, and toleration for the human Euripides; scorn for the founder of Jesuitism, sympathy for the heretical Molinists; and he blesses the imperfect knowledge which makes faith hard. The Pope, like his creator, is "ever a fighter," and his last word is a peremptory rejection of all appeals for mercy, whether in the name of policy, Christian forgiveness, or "soft culture," and a resolve to

"Smite with my whole strength once more, ere end my part,
Ending, so far as man may, this offence."

And with this solemn and final summing-up — this quietly authoritative keynote into which all the clashing discords seem at length to be resolved—the poem, in most hands, would have closed. But Browning was too ingrained a believer in the "oblique" methods of Art to acquiesce in so simple and direct a conclusion; he loved to let truth struggle through devious and unlikely channels to the heart instead of missing its aim by being formally proclaimed or announced. Hence we are hurried from the austere solitary meditation of the aged Pope to the condemned cell of Guido, and have opened before us with amazing swiftness and intensity all the recesses of that monstrous nature, its "lips unlocked" by "lucidity of soul." It ends, not on a solemn key-note, but in that passionate and horror-stricken cry where yet lurks the implicit confession that he is guilty and his doom just—

> "Pompilia, will you let them murder me?"

It is easy—though hardly any longer quite safe—to cavil at the unique structure of *The Ring and the Book.* But this unique structure, which probably never deterred a reader who had once got under way, answers in the most exact and expressive way to Browning's aims. The subject is not the story of Pompilia only, but the fortunes of her story, and of all stories of spiritual naïveté such as hers, when projected upon the variously refracting media of mundane judgment and sympathies. It is not her guilt or innocence only which is on trial, but the mind of man in its capacity to receive and apprehend the surprises of the spirit. The issue, triumphant for her, is dubious and qualified for the mind of man, where the truth only at last flames forth in its purity. Browning even hints at the close that "one lesson" to be had from his work is the falseness of human estimation, fame, and speech. But for the poet who thus summed up the purport of his twenty thousand verses, this was not the whole truth of the matter. Here, as always, that immense, even riotous, vitality of his made the hazards and vicissitudes of the process even more precious than the secure triumph of the issue, and the spirit of poetry itself lured him along the devious ways of minds in which personality set its own picturesque or lurid tinge upon truth. The execution vindicated the design. Voluble, even "mercilessly voluble," the poet of *The Ring and the Book* undoubtedly is. But it is the volubility of a consummate master of expression, in whose hands the difficult medium of blank verse becomes an instrument of Shakespearian flexibility and compass, easily answering to all the shifts and windings of a prodigal invention, familiar without being vulgar, gritty with homely detail without being flat; always, at its lowest levels, touched, like a plain just before sunrise, with hints of ethereal light, momentarily withheld; and rising from time to time without effort to a magnificence of phrase and movement touched in its turn with that suggestion of the homely and the familiar which in the inmost recesses of Browning's genius lurked so near—so vitally near—to the roots of the sublime.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTERMATH.

Which wins—Earth's poet or the Heavenly Muse?
—*Aristophanes' Apology.*

THE publication of *The Ring and the Book* marks in several ways a turning-point in Browning's career. Conceived and planned before the tragic close of his married life, and written during the first desolate years of bereavement, it is, more than any other of his greater poems, pervaded by his wife's spirit, a crowning monument to his Lyric Love. But it is also the last upon which her spirit left any notable trace. With his usual extraordinary recuperative power, Browning re-moulded the mental universe which her love had seemed to complete, and her death momentarily to shatter, into a new, lesser completeness. He lived in the world, and frankly "liked earth's way," enjoying the new gifts of friendship and of fame which the years brought in rich measure. The little knot of critics whose praise even of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* had been little more than a cry in the wilderness, found their voices lost in the chorus of admiration which welcomed the story of Pompilia. Some stout recalcitrants, it is true, like Edward FitzGerald, held their ground. And while the tone of even hostile criticism became respectful, enough of it remained to provide objects, seven years later, for the uproarious chaff of *Pacchiarotto.*

From 1869 to 1871 Browning published nothing, and he appears also to have written nothing beyond a sonnet commemorating Helen, the mother of Lord Dufferin (dated April 26, 1870), almost the only set of fourteen lines in his works of which not one proclaims his authorship. But the decade which followed was more prolific than any other ten years of his life. Between 1871 and 1878 nine volumes in swift succession allured, provoked, or bewildered the reading world. Everything was now planned on a larger scale; the vast compass and boundless volubility of *The Ring and the Book* became normal. He gave free rein to his delight in intricate involutions of plot and of argument; the dramatic monologue grew into novels in verse like *Red-cotton Night-cap Country* and *The Inn Album;* and the "special pleaders," Hohenstiel and Juan, expounded their cases with a complexity of apparatus unapproached even by Sludge. A certain relaxation of poetic nerve is on the whole everywhere apparent, notwithstanding the prodigal display of crude intellectual power. His poetic alchemy is less potent, the ore of sordid fact remains sordid still. Not that his high spirituality is insecure, his heroic idealism dimmed; but they coalesce less intimately with the alert wit and busy intelligence of the mere "clever man," and seek their nutriment and material more readily in regions of legend and romance, where the transmuting work of imagination has been already done. It is no accident that his lifelong delight in the ideal figures of Greek tragedy, so unlike his own creations, became in these years for the first time an effective source of poetry. The poems of this decade form thus an odd motley series —realism and romance interlaced but hardly blent, Æschylus and Euripides, the divine helper Herakles and the glorious embodiment of the soul of Athens, Balaustion, emerging and re-emerging after intervals occupied by the chicaneries of Miranda or the Elder Man. No inept legend for the Browning of this decade is the noble song of Thamuris which his Aristophanes half mockingly declaimed. "Earth's poet" and "the heavenly Muse" are not allies, and they at times go different ways.

Hervé Riel (published March 1871) is less characteristic of Browning in purely literary quality than in the hearty helpfulness which it celebrates, and the fine international chivalry by which it was inspired. The French disasters moved him deeply; he had many personal ties with France, and was sharing with his dearest French friend, Joseph Milsand, as near neighbour, a primitive villeggiatura in a Norman fishing-village when the stupendous catastrophe of Sedan broke upon them.

Sympathy with the French sufferers induced Browning to do violence to a cherished principle by offering the poem to George Smith for publication in *The Cornhill*. Most of its French readers doubtless heard of Hervé Riel, as well as of Robert Browning, for the first time. His English readers found it hard to classify among the naval ballads of their country, few of which had been devoted to celebrating the exploits of foreign sailors, or the deliverance of hostile fleets. But they recognised the poet of *The Ring and the Book*. Hervé has no touch of Browning's "philosophy." He is none the less a true kinsman, in his homely fashion, of Caponsacchi,—summoned in a supreme emergency for which the appointed authorities have proved unequal.

A greater tale of heroic helpfulness was presently to engage him. *Balaustion's Adventure* was, as the charming dedication tells us, the most delightful of May-month amusements; but in the splendid proem which enshrines the story of Herakles and Alkestis, we still feel the thrill of the deadly conflict; the agony of France may be partly divined in the agony of Athens. Thirty years before, he had shown, in the noble fragmentary "prologue" to a *Hippolytus* (*Artemis Prologizes*), a command of the majestic, reticent manner of Greek tragedy sufficiently remarkable in one whose natural instincts of expression were far more Elizabethan than Greek. The incongruity of Greek dramatic methods with his own seems to have speedily checked his progress; but Euripides, the author of the Greek *Hippolytus*, retained a peculiar fascination for him, and it was on another Euripidean drama that he now, in the fulness of his powers, set his hand. The result certainly does not diminish our sense of the incongruity. Keenly as he admired the humanity and pathos of Euripides, he challenges comparison with Euripides most successfully when he goes completely his own way. He was too robustly original to "transcribe" well, and his bold emphatic speech, curbed to the task of reproducing the choice and pregnant sobriety of Attic style, is apt to eliminate everything but the sobriety. The "transcribed" Greek is often yet flatter than "literal" versions of Greek verse are wont to be, and when Browning speaks in his own person the style recovers itself with a sudden and vehement bound, like a noble wild creature abruptly released from restraint. Among the finest of these "recoveries" are the bursts of description which Balaustion's enthusiasm interjects between the passages of dialogue. Such is the magnificent picture of the coming of Herakles. In the original he merely enters as the chorus end their song, addressing them with the simple inquiry, "Friends, is Admetos haply within?" to which the chorus reply, like civil retainers, "Yes, Herakles, he is at home." Browning, or his Balaustion, cannot permit the mighty undoer of the tragic harms to come on in this homely fashion. A great interrupting voice rings suddenly through the dispirited maunderings of Admetos' housefolk; and the hearty greeting, "My hosts here!" thrills them with the sense that something good and opportune is at hand:—

> "Sudden into the midst of sorrow leapt,
> Along with the gay cheer of that great voice
> Hope, joy, salvation: Herakles was here!
> Himself o' the threshold, sent his voice on first
> To herald all that human and divine
> I' the weary, happy face of him,—half god,
> Half man, which made the god-part god the more."

The heroic helpfulness of Herakles is no doubt the chief thing for Browning in the story. The large gladness of spirit with which he confronts the meticulous and perfunctory mourning of the stricken household reflected his own habitual temper with peculiar vividness. But it is clear that the Euripidean story contained an element which Browning could not assimilate—Admetos' acceptance of Alkestis' sacrifice. To the Greek the action seemed quite in order; the persons who really incurred his reproof were Admetos' parents, who in spite of their advanced years refused to anticipate their approaching death in their son's favour. Browning cannot away with an Admetos who, from sheer reluctance to die, allowed his wife to suffer death in his place; and he characteristically suggests a version of the story in which its issues are determined from first to last, and on both sides, by self-sacrificing love. Admetos is now the large-minded king who grieves to be called away before his work for his people is done. Alkestis seeks, with Apollo's leave, to take his place, so that her lord may live and carry out the purposes of his soul,—

> "Nor let Zeus lose the monarch meant in thee."

But Admetos will not allow this; for Alkestis is as spirit to his flesh, and his life without her would be but a passive death. To which "pile of truth on truth" she rejoins by adding the "one truth more," that his refusal of her sacrifice would be in effect a surrender of the supreme duty laid upon him of reigning a righteous king,—that this life-purpose of his is above joy and sorrow, and the death which she will undergo for his and its sake, her highest good as it is his. And in effect, her death, instead of paralysing him, redoubles the vigour of his soul, so that Alkestis, living on in a mind made better by her presence, has not in the old tragic sense died at all, and finds her claim to enter Hades rudely rejected by "the pensive queen o' the twilight," for whom death meant just to die, and wanders back accordingly to live once more by Admetos' side. Such the story became when the Greek dread of death was replaced by Browning's spiritual conception of a death glorified by love. The pathos and tragic forces of it were inevitably enfeebled; no Herakles was needed to pluck this Alkestis from the death she sought, and the rejection of her claim to die is perilously near to Lucianic burlesque. But, simply as poetry, the joyous sun-like radiance of the mighty spoiler of death is not unworthily replaced by the twilight queen, whose eyes

> "lingered still
> Straying among the flowers of Sicily,"

absorbed in the far memory of the life that Herakles asserted and enforced,—until, at Alkestis' summons, she

> "broke through humanity
> Into the orbed omniscience of a god."

From his idealised Admetos Browning passed with hardly a pause to attempt the more difficult feat of idealising a living sovereign. Admetos was ennobled by presenting him as a political idealist; the French Emperor, whose career had closed at Sedan, was in some degree qualified for a parallel operation by the obscurity which still invested the inmost nature of that well-meaning adventurer. Browning had watched Louis Napoleon's career with mixed feelings; he had resented the *coup d'état*, and still more the annexation of Savoy and Nice after the war of 1859. But he had never shared the bitter animus which prevailed at home. He was equally far, no doubt, from sharing the exalted hero-worship which inspired his wife's *Poems before Congress*. The creator of *The Italian in England*, of Luigi, and Bluphocks, could not but recognise the signal services of Napoleon to the cause of Italian freedom, however sharply he condemned the hard terms on which Italy had been compelled to purchase it. "It was a great action; but he has taken eighteenpence for it—which is a pity";[1] it was on the lines of this epigram, already quoted, that eleven years later he still interpreted the fallen emperor, and that he now completed, as it would seem, the abandoned poem of 1860. He saw in him a man of generous impulses doubled with a *borné* politician, a ruler of genuine Liberal and even democratic proclivities, which the timid calculations of a second-rate opportunist reduced to a contemptible travesty of Liberalism. The shifting standpoints of such a man are reproduced with superfluous fidelity in his supposed Defence, which seems designed to be as elusive and impalpable as the character it reflects. How unlike the brilliant and precise realism of Blougram, sixteen years before! The upcurling cloud-rings from Hohenstiel's cigar seem to symbolise something unsubstantial and evasive in the whole fabric. The assumptions we are invited to form give way one after another. Leicester Square proves the "Residenz," the "bud-mouthed arbitress" a shadowy memory, the discourse to a friendly and flattered hearer a midnight meditation. And there is a like fluctuation of mood. Now he is formally justifying his past, now musing, half wistfully, half ironically, over all that he might have been and was not. At the outset we see him complacently enough intrenched within a strong position, that of the consistent opportunist, who made the best of what he found, not a creator but a conservator, "one who keeps the world safe." But he has ardent ideas and aspirations.

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[1] *Letters of E. B. B.*, ii. 385.

The freedom of Italy has kindled his imagination, and in the grandest passage of the poem he broods over his frustrate but deathless dream :—

> "Ay, still my fragments wander, music-fraught,
> Sighs of the soul, mine once, mine now, and mine
> For ever! Crumbled arch, crushed aqueduct,
> Alive with tremors in the shaggy growth
> Of wild-wood, crevice-sown, that triumphs there,
> Imparting exultation to the hills."

But if he had abandoned these generous dreams, he had won free trade and given the multitude cheap bread, and in a highly ingenious piece of sophistry he explains, by the aid of the gospel of Evolution, how men are united by their common hunger, and thrust apart by their conflicting ideas. But Hohenstiel knows very well that his intrenchments are not unassailable; and he goes on to compose an imaginary biography of himself as he might have been, with comments which reflect his actual course. The finest part of this æthereal voyage is that in which his higher unfulfilled self pours scorn upon the paltry duplicities of the "Peace" policy by which his actual and lower self had kept on good terms abroad, and beguiled the imperious thirst for "la gloire" at home. Indignantly the author of *Hervé Riel* asks why "the more than all magnetic race" should have to court its rivals by buying their goods untaxed, or guard against them by war for war's sake, when Mother Earth has no pride above her pride in that same

> "race all flame and air
> And aspiration to the boundless Great,
> The incommensurably Beautiful—
> Whose very falterings groundward come of flight
> Urged by a pinion all too passionate
> For heaven and what it holds of gloom and glow."

The Ring and the Book had made Browning famous. But fame was far from tempting him to undue compliance with the tastes of his new-won public; rather it prompted him to indulge his genius more freely, and to go his own way with a more complete security and unconcern. *Hohenstiel-Schwangau*—one of the rockiest and least attractive of all Browning's poems—had mystified most of its readers and been little relished by the rest. And now that plea for a discredited politician was followed up by what, on the face of it, was, as Mrs Orr puts it, "a defence of inconstancy in marriage." The apologist for Napoleon III. came forward as the advocate of Don Juan. The prefixed bit of dialogue from Molière's play explains the situation. Juan, detected by his wife in an intrigue, is completely nonplussed. "Fie!" cries Elvire, mockingly (in Browning's happy paraphrase),—

> "Fie! for a man of mode, accustomed at the court
> To such a style of thing, how awkwardly my lord
> Attempts defence!"

In this emergency, Browning, as it would seem, steps in, and provides the arch-voluptuary with a philosophy of illicit love, quite beyond the speculative capacity of any Juan in literature, and glowing with poetry of a splendour and fertility which neither Browning himself nor the great English poet who had identified his name with that of Juan, and whom Browning in this very poem overwhelms with genial banter, ever surpassed. The poem inevitably challenged comparison with Byron's masterpiece. In dazzling play of intellect, in swift interchange of wit and passion, the English nineteenth century produced nothing more comparable to the *Don Juan* of Byron than *Fifine at the Fair*.

It cannot be denied that the critics had some excuse who, like Mortimer, frankly identified Browning with his hero, and described the poem as an assertion of the "claim to relieve the fixity of conjugal affection by varied adventure in the world of temporary loves."[1] For Browning has not merely given no direct hint of his own divergence from Juan, corresponding to his significant comment upon Blougram—"he said true things but called them by false names"; he has made his own subtlest and profoundest convictions on life and art spring spontaneously from the brain of this brilliant conqueror of women. Like Goethe's Faust, he unmistakably shares the mind, the wisdom, the faith, of his creator; it is plausible to suppose that the poet indorses his application of them. This is unquestionably a complete mistake; but Browning, as usual, presumed too much upon his readers' insight, and took no pains to obviate a confusion which he clearly supposed to be impossible.

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[1] Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 297. Her own criticism is, however, curiously indecisive and embarrassed.

It was on the strand at Pornic that he encountered the fateful gipsy whom he calls Fifine. Arnold, years before, had read unutterable depths of soul in another gipsy child by another shore. For Browning now, as in the days of the *Flight of the Duchess*, the gipsy symbolised the life of joyous detachment from the constraints of society and civilisation. The elementary mood, out of which the wondrous woof of reasonings and images is evolved, is simply the instinctive beat of the spirit of romance in us all, in sympathy with these light-hearted losels of the wild, who "cast allegiance off, play truant, nor repine," and though disgraced but seem to relish life the more.

The beautiful *Prologue*—one of the most original lyrics in the language—strikes the keynote:—

"Sometimes, when the weather
  Is blue, and warm waves tempt
To free oneself of tether,
  And try a life exempt

From worldly noise and dust,
  In the sphere which overbrims
With passion and thought,—why, just
  Unable to fly, one swims. . . .

Emancipate through passion
  And thought,—with sea for sky,
We substitute, in a fashion,
  For heaven—poetry."

It is this "emancipation" from our confinement in the bonds of prose, commonplace, and routine, by a passion and thought-winged imagination, which is the true subject of the poem. But he chooses to convey his meaning, as usual, through the rich refracting medium of dramatic characters and situations quite unlike his own. So his "apology for poetry" becomes an item in Don Juan's case for the "poetry" of dalliance with light-o'-loves. Fifine herself acquires new importance; the emancipated gipsy turns into the pert seductive coquette, while over against her rises the pathetic shadow of the "wife in trouble," her white fingers pressing Juan's arm, "ravishingly pure" in her "pale constraint." Between these three persons the moving drama is played out, ending, like all Don Juan stories, with the triumph of the baser influence. Elvire, with her eloquent silences and wistful pathos, is an exquisite creation,—a wedded sister of Shakespeare's Hero; Fifine, too, with her strutting bravado and "pose half frank, half fierce," shrills her discordant note vivaciously enough. The principal speaker himself is the most complex of Browning's casuists, a marvellously rich and many-hued piece of portraiture. This Juan is deeply versed in all the activities of the imagination which he so eloquently defends. Painting and poetry, science and philosophy, are at his command; above all, he is an artist and a poet in the lore of Love.

It is easy to see that the kind of adventure on which Juan claims the right of projecting his imagination has close affinities with the habitual procedure of Browning's own. Juan defends his dealings with the gay fizgig Fifine as a step to the fuller appreciation of Elvire; he demands freedom to escape only as a means of possessing more surely and intimately what he has. And Browning's "emancipation" is not that of the purely Romantic poet, who pursues a visionary abstraction remote from all his visible environment. The emancipated soul, for him, was rather that which incessantly "practised with" its environment, fighting its way through countless intervening films of illusion to the full knowledge of itself and of all that it originally held *in posse.* This might not be an adequate account of his own artistic processes, in which genial instinct played a larger, and resolute will a smaller, part than his invincible athleticism of temperament would suggest. But his marvellous wealth of spontaneous vision was fed and enriched by incessant "practice with" his environment; his idealism was vitalised by the ceaseless play of eye and brain upon the least promising mortal integuments of spirit; he possessed "Elvire" the more securely for having sent forth his adventurous imagination to practise upon innumerable Fifines.

The poem itself—as a defence of his poetic methods—was an "adventure" in which imagination played an unusually splendid part. A succession of brilliant and original images, visions, similes, parables, exhibits the twofold nature of the "stuff" with which the artist plays,—its inferiority, its poverty, its "falseness" in itself, its needfulness, its potency, its worth for him.

It is the water which supports the swimmer, but in which he cannot live; the dross of straw and chaff which yields the brilliant purity of flame (c. 55); the technical cluster of sounds from which issues "music—that burst of pillared cloud by day and pillared fire by night" (c. 41). The whole poem is haunted by the sense of dissonance which these images suggest between the real and the apparent meaning of things. Browning's world, else so massive and so indubitable, becomes unsubstantial and phantasmal, an illusive pageant in which Truth is present only under a mask, being "forced to manifest itself through falsehood." Juan, who declares that, unlike poets, "we prose-folk" always dream, has, in effect, a visionary quality of imagination which suits his thesis and his theme. The "dream figures" of the famous ladies pass before us like a gorgeous tapestry,—some rich Venetian rendering of a medieval *ballade du temps jadis;* then Venice itself opens before us, all moving life and colour, under the enchantment of Schumann's *Carnival*, only to resolve itself into a vaster pageant of the world, with its mighty fanes of art and science, which, seemingly "fixed as fate, not fairy-work," yet

> "tremblingly grew blank
> From bright, then broke afresh in triumph,—ah, but sank
> As soon, for liquid change through artery and vein
> O' the very marble wound its way."

The August of 1872 found Browning and his sister once more in France. This time, however, not at

Croisic but Saint Aubin—the primitive hamlet on the Norman coast to which he had again been drawn by his attachment to Joseph Milsand. At a neighbouring village was another old friend, Miss Thackeray, who has left a charming account of the place. They walked along a narrow cliff-path: "The sea-coast far below our feet, the dried, arid vegetation of the sandy way, the rank yellow snapdragon lining the paths. . . . We entered the Brownings' house. The sitting-room door opened to the garden and the sea beyond—a fresh-swept bare floor, a table, three straw chairs, one book upon the table." A misunderstanding, now through the good offices of Milsand happily removed, had clouded the friendship of Browning and Miss Thackeray; and his joyous revulsion of heart has left characteristic traces in the poem which he dedicated to his "fair friend." The very title is jest—an outflow of high spirits in an exuberantly hearty hand-shake—"British man with British maid"; the country of the "Red-cotton Night-cap" being in fact, of course, the country which her playful realism had already nicknamed "White-cotton Night-cap Country," from the white lawn head-dress of the Norman women. Nothing so typical and everyday could set Browning's imagination astir, and among the wilderness of white, innocent and flavourless, he caught at a story which promised to be "wrong and red and picturesque," and vary "by a splotch the righteous flat of insipidity."

The story of Miranda the Paris jeweller and his mistress, Clara de Millefleurs, satisfied this condition sufficiently. Time had not mellowed the raw crudity of this "splotch," which Browning found recorded in no old, square, yellow vellum book, but in the French newspapers of that very August; the final judgment of the court at Caen ("Vire") being actually pronounced while he wrote. The poet followed on the heels of the journalist, and borrowed, it must be owned, not a little of his methods. If any poem of Browning's may be compared to versified special correspondence, it is this. He tells the story, in his own person, in blank verse of admirable ease and fluency, from which every pretence of poetry is usually remote. What was it in this rather sordid tale that arrested him? Clearly the strangely mingled character of Miranda. Castile and Paris contend in his blood; and his love adventures, begun on the boulevards and in their spirit, end in an ecstasy of fantastic devotion. His sins are commonplace and prosaic enough, but his repentances detach him altogether from the herd of ordinary penitents as well as of ordinary sinners—confused and violent gesticulations of a visionary ascetic struggling to liberate himself from the bonds of his own impurity. "The heart was wise according to its lights"; but the head was incapable of shaping this vague heart-wisdom into coherent practice. A parallel piece of analysis presents Clara as a finished artist in life—a Meissonier of limited but flawless perfection in her unerring selection of means to ends. In other words, this not very attractive pair struck Browning as another example of his familiar contrast between those who "try the low thing and leave it done," and those who aim higher and fail. Yet it must be owned that these Browningesque ideas are not thoroughly wrought into the substance of the poem; they are rather a sort of marginal embroidery woven on to a story which, as a whole, has neither been shaped by Browning's hand nor vitalised with his breath. Neither Clara nor Miranda can be compared in dramatic force with his great creations; even Clara's harangue to the Cousinry, with all its passion and flashing scorn, is true rather to her generic character as the injured champion of her dead lord than to her individual variety of it — the woman of subtle, inflexible, yet calculating devotion. Miranda's soliloquy before he throws himself from the Tower is a powerful piece of construction, but, when the book is closed, what we seem to see in it is not the fantastical goldsmith surveying the motives of his life, but Browning filling in the bizarre outlines of his construction with appropriate psychological detail. Another symptom of decline in Browning's most characteristic kind of power is probably to be found in the play of symbolism which invests with an air of allegorical abstraction the "Tower" and the "Turf," and makes the whole poem, with all its prosaic realism, intelligibly regarded as a sort of fantasia on self-indulgence and self-control.

The summer retreat of 1874 was found once more on the familiar north coast of France,—this time at the quiet hamlet of Mers, near Tréport. In this lonely place, with scarcely a book at hand, he wrote the greater part of the most prodigally and exuberantly learned of all his poems—*Aristophanes' Apology* (published April 1875). It was not Browning's way to repeat his characters, but the story of Balaustion, the brilliant girl devotee of Euripides, had proved an admirable setting for his interpretations of Greek drama; and the charm of that earlier "most delightful of May-month amusements" was perhaps not the less easily revived in these weeks of constant companionship with a devoted woman-friend of his own. Balaustion is herself full ten years older than at the time of her first adventure; her fresh girlish enthusiasm has ripened into the ardent conviction of intellectual maturity; she can not only cite Euripides, but vindicate his art against his mightiest assailant. Situation, scenery, language, are here all more complex. The first Adventure was almost Greek in its radiant and moving simplicity; the last is Titanically Browningesque, a riot of the least Hellenic elements of Browning's mind with the uptorn fragments of the Hellenic world. Moreover, the issue is far from being equally clear. The glory of Euripides is still the ostensible theme; but Aristophanes had so many points of contact with Browning himself, and appeals in his defence to so many root-ideas of Browning's own, that the reader hesitates between the poet to whom Browning's imagination allied him, and the poet whom his taste preferred. His Aristophanes is, like himself, the poetry of "Life," a broad and generous realist, who like Lippo Lippi draws all existence into his art; an enemy of all asceticisms and abstractions, who drives his meaning home through vivid concrete example and drastic phrase, rather than by enunciating the impressive moral commonplaces of tragic poetry.[1] Aristophanes, too, had been abused for his "unintelligible" poetry,—"mere psychologic puzzling,"[2]—by a "chattering" public which preferred the lilt of nursery rhymes. The magnificent portrait of Aristophanes is conceived in the very spirit of the riotous exuberance of intellect and senses—

> "Mind a-wantoning
> At ease of undisputed mastery
> Over the body's brood"—

which was so congenial to the realist in Browning; "the clear baldness—all his head one brow"—and the surging flame of red from cheek to temple; the huge eyeballs rolling back native fire, imperiously triumphant, the "pursed mouth's pout aggressive," and "the beak supreme above," "beard whitening under like a vinous foam."

Balaustion is herself the first to recognise the divinity shrouded in this half satyr-like form: in some of the finest verses of the poem she compares him to the sea-god, whom as a child she had once seen peer

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[1] *Arist. Ap.*, p. 698.

[2] Ib., p. 688.

> "large-looming from his wave,
> . . . . . .
> A sea-worn face, sad as mortality,
> Divine with yearning after fellowship,"

while below the surface all was "tail splash, frisk of fin." And when Balaustion has recited her poet's masterpiece of tragic pathos, Aristophanes lays aside the satirist a moment and attests his affinity to the divine poets by the noble song of Thamyris. The "transcript from Euripides" itself is quite secondary in interest to this vivid and powerful dramatic framework. Far from being a vital element in the action, like the recital of the *Alkestis*, the reading of the *Hercules Furens* is an almost gratuitous diversion in the midst of the talk; and the tameness of a literal (often awkwardly literal) translation is rarely broken by those inrushes of alien genius which are the glory of Browning's *Alkestis.* Yet the very self-restraint sprang probably from Browning's deep sensibility to the pathos of the story. "Large tears," as Mrs Orr has told us, fell from his eyes, and emotion choked his voice, when he first read it aloud to her.

The *Inn Album* is, like *Red-cotton Night-cap Country*, a versified novel, melodramatic in circumstances, frankly familiar in scenery and atmosphere. Once more, as in the *Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, and in *James Lee's Wife*, Browning turned for his "incidents in the development of souls" to the passion and sin-frayed lives of his own countrymen. But no halo of seventeenth-century romance here tempers the sordid modernity of the facts; the "James Lee" of this tragedy appears in person and is drawn with remorseless insistence on every mean detail which announces the "rag-and-feather hero-sham." Everything except his wit and eloquence is sham and shabby in this Club-and-Country-house villain, who violates more signally than any figure in poetic literature the canon that the contriver of the tragic harms must not be totally despicable. A thief, as Schiller said, can qualify for a tragic hero only by adding to his theft the more heroic crime of murder; but Browning's Elder Man compromises even the professional perfidies of a Don Juan with shady dealings at cards and the like which Don Juan himself would have scouted. In *Fifine* the Don Juan of tradition was lifted up into and haloed about with poetical splendours not his own; here he is depressed into an equally alien sorriness of prose. But the decisive and commanding figure, for Browning and for his readers, is of course his victim and Nemesis, the Elder Lady. She is as unlike Pompilia as he is unlike Guido; but we see not less clearly how the upleaping of the soul of womanhood in the child, under the stress of foul and cruel wrongs, has once more asserted its power over him. And if Pompilia often recalls his wife, the situation of the Elder Lady may fairly remind us of that of Marion Erle in *Aurora Leigh*. But many complexities in the working out mark Browning's design. The betrayed girl, scornfully refusing her betrayer's tardy offer of marriage, has sought a refuge, as the wife of a clergyman, in the drudgery of a benighted parish. The chance meeting of the two, four years after, in the inn parlour, their bitter confessions, through the veil of mutual hatred, that life has been ruined for both,—he, with his scandalous successes growing at last notorious, she, the soul which once "sprang at love," now sealed deliberately against beauty, and spent in preaching monstrous doctrines which neither they nor their savage parishioners believe nor observe,—all this is imagined very powerfully and on lines which would hardly have occurred to any one else.

The *Pacchiarotto* volume forms a kind of epilogue to the work of the previous half-dozen years. Since *The Ring and the Book* he had become a famous personage; his successive poems had been everywhere reviewed at length; a large public was genuinely interested in him, while a yet larger complained of his "obscurity," but did not venture to ignore him, and gossiped eagerly about his private life. He himself, mingling freely, an ever-welcome guest, in the choicest London society, had the air of having accepted the world as cordially as it on the whole accepted him. Yet barriers remained. Poems like the *Red-cotton Night-cap Country*, the *Inn Album*, and *Fifine* had alienated many whom *The Ring and the Book* had won captive, and embarrassed the defence of some of Browning's staunchest devotees. Nobody knew better than the popular diner-out, Robert Browning, how few of the men and women who listened to his brilliant talk had any grip upon his inner mind; and he did little to assist their insight. The most affable and accessible of men up to a certain point, he still held himself, in the deeper matters of his art, serenely and securely aloof. But it was a good-humoured, not a cynical, aloofness, which found quite natural expression in a volley of genial chaff at the critics who thought themselves competent to teach him his business. This is the main, at least the most dominant, note of *Pacchiarotto.* It is like an aftermath of *Aristophanes' Apology.* But the English poet scarcely deigns to defend his art. No beautiful and brilliant woman is there to put him on his mettle and call out his chivalry. The mass of his critics are roundly made game of, in a boisterously genial sally, as "sweeps" officiously concerned at his excess of "smoke." *Pacchiarotto* is a whimsical tale of a poor painter who came to grief in a Quixotic effort to "reform" his fellows. Rhyme was never more brilliantly abused than in this *tour de force*, in which the clang of the machinery comes near to killing the music. More seriously, in the finely turned stanzas *At the Mermaid*, and *House*, he avails himself of the habitual reticence of Shakespeare to defend by implication his own reserve, not without a passing sarcasm at the cost of the poet who took Europe by storm with the pageant of his broken heart. *House* is for the most part rank prose, but it sums up incisively in the well-known retort:

> "'*With this same key*
> *Shakespeare unlocked his heart*,' once more!
> Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!"

This "house" image is singularly frequent in this volume. The poet seems haunted by the idea of the barrier walls, which keep off the public gaze, but admit the privileged spirit. In *Fears and Scruples* it symbolises the reticence of God. In *Appearances* the "poor room" in which troth was plighted and the "rich room" in which "the other word was spoken" become half human in sympathy. A woman's "natural magic" makes the bare walls she dwells in a "fairy tale" of verdure and song. The prologue seems deliberately to strike this note, with its exquisite idealisation of the old red brick wall and its creepers lush and lithe,—a formidable barrier indeed, but one which spirit and love can pass. For here the "wall" is the unsympathetic throng who close the poet in; there

> "I—prison-bird, with a ruddy strife
> At breast, and a life whence storm-notes start—
> Hold on, hope hard in the subtle thing
> That's spirit: though cloistered fast, soar free;
> Account as wood, brick, stone, this ring
> Of the rueful neighbours, and—forth to thee!"

These stanzas finely hint at a second theme which wanders in and out among the strident notes of Browning's anti-critical "apologetics." Of all the springs of poetry none lay deeper in Browning than love; to the last he could sing of love with the full inspiration of his best time; and the finest things in this volume are concerned with it. But as compared with the love-lays of the *Dramatic Lyrics* or *Men and Women* there is something wistful, far off, even elegiac, in this love-poetry. A barrier, undefinable but impassable, seems to part us from the full tide of youthful passion. The richest in this tender sunset beauty is the *St Martin's Summer*, where the late love is suddenly smitten with the discovery that its apparent warmth is a ghost of old passion buried but unallayed. Again and again Browning here dwells upon the magic of love,—as if love still retained for the ageing poet an isolated and exceptional irradiating power in a world fast fading into commonplace and prose. The brief, exquisite snatches of song, *Natural Magic*, *Magical Nature*, are joyous tributes to the power of the charm, paid by one who remains master of his heart. *Numpholeptos* is the long-drawn enchanted reverie of one in the very toils of the spell—a thing woven of dreams and emotions, dark-glowing, iridescent to the eye, languorous to the ear, impalpable to the analytic intellect. In *Bifurcation* he puts again, with more of subtlety and of detachment, the problem of the conventional conflict of love with duty, so peremptorily decided in love's favour in *The Statue and the Bust*. *A Forgiveness* is a powerful reworking of the theme of *My Last Duchess*, with an added irony of situation:

Browning, who excels in the drama of silent figures, has drawn none more effective than this guilty priest, who grinds his teeth behind the confessional grating as he listens perforce to the story of his own crime from the lips of the wronged husband, still cherishing the hope that he is unrecognised, or at the worst may elude vengeance in his cloister's solitude; until the avenger's last words throw off the mask:—

> "Hardly, I think! As little helped his brow
> The cloak then, Father—as your grate helps now!"

From these high matters of passion and tragedy we pass by easy steps into the jocular-colloquial region in which the volume opened. Painting in these later days of Browning's has ceased to yield high, or even serious poetry, and Baldinucci's tale of shabby trickery cannot be compared, even for grotesque humour, with the powerful grotesquerie of *Holy-Cross Day*, while it wholly lacks the great lift of Hebraic sublimity at the close. The *Epilogue* returns to the combative apologetics of the title poem; but, unlike that, does attempt some reply to the cavils of the discontented. They cannot have the strong and the sweet—body and bouquet—at once, he tells them in effect, and he chooses to be strong, to give the good grape and leave the cowslips growing in the meadow. The argument was but another sally of the poet's good-humoured chaff, and would not have stood the scrutiny of his subtler mind. Doubtless he, like Ben Jonson, inclined to see signs of the "strong" in the astringent and the gritty; but no one knew better, when he chose, to wed his "strength" with "sweetness." The falling-off of the present volume compared with *Men and Women* or *Dramatis Personæ* lay less in the lack of either quality than in his failure to bring them together. Of the "stiff brew" there is plenty; but the choicest aroma comes from that "wine of memories"—the fragrant reminiscences—which the poet affected to despise. The epilogue ends, incorrigibly, with a promise to "posset and cosset" the cavilling reader henceforward with "nettle-broth," good for the sluggish blood and the disordered stomach.

The following year brought a production which the cavilling reader might excusably regard as a fulfilment of this jocose threat. For the translation of the *Agamemnon* (1877) was not in any sense a serious contribution to the English knowledge and love of Greek drama. The Balaustion "transcripts" had betrayed an imperfect sensibility to the finer qualities of Greek dramatic style. But Browning seems to have gone to work upon the greatest of antique tragedies with the definite intention of showing, by a version of literal fidelity, how little the Greek drama at its best owed to Greek speech. And he has little difficulty in making the oracular brevity of Æschylus look bald, and his sublime incoherences frigid.[1] The result is, nevertheless, very interesting and instructive to the student of Browning's mind. Nowhere else do we feel so acutely how foreign to his versatile and athletic intellect was the primitive and elemental imagination which interprets the heart and the conscience of nations. His acute individualism in effect betrayed him, and made his too faithful translation resemble a parody of this mighty fragment of the mind of Themistoclean Athens by one of the brilliant irresponsible Sophists of the next generation.

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[1] It is hard to explain how Browning came also to choose his restless hendecasyllables as a medium for the stately iambic of Æschylus. It is more like Fletcher outdoing himself in double endings.

The spring and summer of 1877 were not productive. The summer holiday was spent in a new haunt among the Savoy Alps, and Browning missed the familiar stimulus of the sea-air. But the early autumn brought an event which abruptly shattered his quiescence, and called forth, presently, the most intimately personal poem of his later years. Miss Ann Egerton-Smith, his gifted and congenial companion at London concerts, and now, for the fourth year in succession, in the summer *villeggiatura*, died suddenly of heart disease at dawn on Sept. 14, as she was preparing for a mountain expedition with her friends. It was not one of those losses which stifle thought or sweep it along on the vehement tide of lyric utterance; it was rather of the kind which set it free, creating an atmosphere of luminous serenity about it, and allaying all meaner allurements and distractions. Elegy is often the outcome of such moods; and the elegiac note is perceptible in the grave music of *La Saisiaz*. Yet the poem as a whole does not even distantly recall, save in the quiet intensity of its ground tone, the noble poems in which Milton or Shelley, Arnold or Tennyson, commemorated their dead friends. He himself commemorated no other dead friend in a way like this; to his wife's memory he had given only the sacred silence, the impassioned hymn, the wealth of poetry inspired by her spirit but not addressed to her. This poem, also, was written "once, and only once, and for one only." *La Saisiaz* recalls to us, perversely perhaps, poems of his in which no personal sorrow beats. The glory of the dawn and the mountain-peak—Salève with its outlook over the snowy splendour of Mont Blanc—instils itself here into the mourner's mood, as, long before, a like scene had animated the young disciples of the Grammarian; while the "cold music" of Galuppi's Toccata seems to be echoed inauspiciously in these lingering trochaics. Something of both moods survives, but the dominant tone is a somewhat grey and tempered hope, remote indeed from the oppressive sense of evanescence, the crumbling mortality, of the second poem, remote no less from the hushed exaltation, the subdued but rapturous confidence of the first.

The poet is growing old; the unity of poetic vision is breaking up into conflicting aspects only to be adjusted in the give and take of debate; he puts off his singing robes to preside as moderator, while Fancy and Reason exchange thrust and parry on the problem of immortality; delivering at last, as the "sad summing up of all," a balanced and tentative affirmation. And he delivers the decision with an oppressive sense that it is but his own. He is "Athanasius contra mundum"; and he dwells, with a "pallid smile" which Athanasius did not inspire, upon the marvellous power of fame. Nay, Athanasius himself has his doubts. Even his sober hope is not a secure possession; but in the gloom of London's November he remembers that he had hoped in the sunset glory of Salève, and "saves up" the memory of that pregnant hour for succour in less prosperous times.

The *Two Poets of Croisic*, published with *La Saisiaz*, cannot be detached from it. The opening words take up the theme of "Fame," there half mockingly played with, and the whole poem is a sarcastic criticism of the worship of Fame. The stories of René Gentilhomme and Paul Desfarges Maillard are told with an immense burly vivacity, in the stanza, and a Browningesque version of the manner, of *Beppo*. Both stories turned upon those decisive moments which habitually caught Browning's eye. Only, in their case, the decisive moment was not one of the revealing crises which laid bare their utmost depths, but a crisis which temporarily invested them with a capricious effulgence. Yet these instantaneous transformations have a peculiar charm for Browning; they touch and fall in with his fundamental ideas of life; and the delicious prologue and epilogue hint these graver analogies in a dainty music which pleasantly relieves the riotous uncouthness of the tale itself. If René's life is suddenly lighted up, so is the moss bank with the "blue flash" of violets in spring; and the diplomatic sister through whose service Paul wins his laurels has a more spiritual comrade in the cicada, who, with her little heart on fire, sang forth the note of the broken string and won her singer his prize. Browning's pedestrian verse passes into poetry as he disengages from the transient illusions, the flickerings and bickerings, of Fame, the eternal truth of Love. But it is only in the closing stanzas of the main poem that his thought clearly emerges; when, having exposed the vanity of fame as a test of poetic merit, he asks how, then, poets shall be tried; and lays down the characteristic criterion, a happy life. But it is the happiness of Rabbi ben Ezra, a joy three parts pain, the happiness won not by ignoring evil but by mastering it!—

"So, force is sorrow, and each sorrow, force:
  What then? since Swiftness gives the charioteer
The palm, his hope be in the vivid horse
  Whose neck God clothed with thunder, not the steer
Sluggish and safe! Yoke Hatred, Crime, Remorse,
  Despair: but ever mid the whirling fear
Let, through the tumult, break the poet's face
Radiant, assured his wild slaves win the race!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAST DECADE.

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiled.

Since the catastrophe of 1861 Browning had not entered Italy. In the autumn of 1878 he once more bent his steps thither. Florence, indeed, he refused to revisit; it was burnt in upon his brain by memories intolerably dear. But in Venice the charm of Italy reasserted itself, and he returned during his remaining autumns with increasing frequency to the old-fashioned hostelry, Dell' Universo, on the Grand Canal, or latterly, to the second home provided by the hospitality of his gifted and congenial American friend, Mrs Arthur Bronson. Asolo, too, the town of Pippa, he saw again, after forty years' absence, with poignant feelings,—"such things have begun and ended with me in the interval!" But the poignancy of memory did not restore the magic of perception which had once been his. The mood described ten years later in the Prologue to *Asolando* was already dominant: the iris glow of youth no longer glorified every common object of the natural world, but "a flower was just a flower." The glory still came by moments; some of his most thrilling outbursts of song belong to this time. But he built up no more great poems. He was approaching seventy, and it might well seem that if so prolific a versifier was not likely to become silent his poetry was rapidly resolving itself into wastes of theological argument, of grotesque posturing, or intellectualised anecdotage. The *Dramatic Idyls* of 1879 and 1880 showed that these more serious forebodings were at least premature. There was little enough in them, no doubt, of the qualities traditionally connected with "idyll." Browning habitually wore his rue with a difference, and used familiar terms in senses of his own. There is nothing here of "enchanted reverie" or leisurely pastoralism. Browning's "idyls" are studies in life's moments of stress and strain, not in its secluded pleasances and verdurous wooded ways. It is for the most part some new variation of his familiar theme—the soul taken in the grip of a tragic crisis, and displaying its unsuspected deeps and voids. Not all are of this kind, however; and while his keenness for intense and abnormal effects is as pronounced as ever, he seeks them in an even more varied field. Italy, the main haunt of his song, yields—it can hardly be said to have inspired—one only of the *Idyls*—*Pietro of Abano.* Old memories of Russia are furbished up in *Iván Ivánovitch*, odd gatherings from the byways of England and America in *Ned Bratts*, *Halbert and Hob*, *Martin Relph;* and he takes from Virgil's hesitating lips the hint of a joyous pagan adventure of the gods, and tells it with his own brilliant plenitude and volubility. The mythic treatment of nature had never appealed much to Browning, even as a gay decorative device; he was presently to signalise his rejection of it in *Gerard de Lairesse*, a superb example of what he rejected. In all mythology there was something foreign to the tenacious humanity of his intellect; he was most open to its appeal where it presented divinity stretching forth a helping hand to man. The noble "idyl" of *Echetlos* is thus a counterpart, in its brief way, to the great tragic tale of Herakles and Alkestis. Echetlos, the mysterious ploughman who shone amid the ranks at Marathon,

"clearing Greek earth of weed
As he routed through the Sabian and rooted up the Mede,"

is one of the many figures which thrill us with Browning's passion for Greece, and he is touched with a kind of magic which it did not lie in his nature often to communicate. But the great successes of the *Dramatic Idyls* are to be found mainly among the tales of the purely human kind that Browning had been used to tell. *Pheidippides* belongs to the heroic line of *How they brought the Good News* and *Hervé Riel.* The poetry of crisis, of the sudden, unforeseen, and irremediable critical moment, upon which so much of Browning's psychology converges, is carried to an unparalleled point of intensity in *Clive* and *Martin Relph.* And in most of these "idyls" there emerges a trait always implicit in Browning but only distinctly apparent in this last decade—the ironical contrasts between the hidden deeps of a man's soul and the assumptions or speculations of his neighbours about it. The two worlds—inner and outer—fall more sharply apart; stranger abysses of self-consciousness appear on the one side, more shallow and complacent illusions on the other. Relph's horror of remorse—painted with a few strokes of incomparable intensity, like his 'Get you behind the man I am now, you man that I used to be!'—is beyond the comprehension of the friendly peasants; Clive's "fear" is as much misunderstood by his auditor as his courage by the soldiers; the "foolishness" of Muleykeh equally illudes his Arab comrades; the Russian villagers, the Pope, and the lord have to fumble through a long process of argument to the conclusion which for Iván had been the merest matter of fact from the first. Admirable in its quiet irony is the contrast between the stormy debate over his guilt or innocence and his serene security of mind as he sits cutting out a toy for his children:—

> "They told him he was free
> As air to walk abroad; 'How otherwise?' asked he."

With the "wild men" Halbert and Hob it is the spell of a sudden memory which makes an abrupt rift between the men they have seemed to be and the men they prove. Browning in his earlier days had gloried in these moments of disclosure; now they served to emphasise the normal illusion. "Ah me!" sounds the note of the proem to the second series, scornful and sad:—

"Ah me!
So ignorant of man's whole,
Of bodily organs plain to see—
So sage and certain, frank and free,
About what's under lock and key—
Man's soul!"

The volume called *Jocoseria* (1883) contains some fine things, and abounds with Browning's invariable literary accomplishment and metrical virtuosity, but on the whole points to the gradual disintegration of his genius. "Wanting is—what?" is the significant theme of the opening lyric, and most of the poetry has something which recalls the "summer redundant" of leaf and flower not "breathed above" by vitalising passion. Compared with the *Men and Women* or the *Dramatis Personæ*, the *Jocoseria* as a whole are indeed

"Framework which waits for a picture to frame, . .
Roses embowering with nought they embower."

Browning, the poet of the divining imagination, is less apparent here than the astute ironical observer who delights in pricking the bubbles of affectation, stripping off the masks of sham, and exhibiting human nature in unadorned nakedness. *Donald* is an exposure, savage and ugly, of savagery and ugliness in Sport; *Solomon and Balkis* a reduction, dainty and gay, of these fabled paragons of wisdom to the dimensions of ordinary vain and amorous humanity. Lilith and Eve unmask themselves under stress of terror, as Balkis and Solomon at the compulsion of the magic ring, and Adam urbanely replaces the mask. Jochanan Hakkadosh, the saintly prop of Israel, expounds from his deathbed a gospel of struggle and endurance in which a troubled echo of the great strain of Ben Ezra may no doubt be heard; but his career is, as a whole, a half-sad, half-humorous commentary on the vainness of striving to extend the iron frontiers of mortality. Lover, poet, soldier, statist have each contributed a part of their lives to prolong and enrich the saint's: but their fresh idealisms have withered when grafted upon his sober and sapless brain; while his own garnered wisdom fares no better when committed to the crude enthusiasm of his disciples. But twice, in this volume, a richer and fuller music sounds. In the great poem of *Ixion*, human illusions are still the preoccupying thought; but they appear as fetters, not as specious masks, and instead of the serio-comic exposure of humanity we see its tragic and heroic deliverance. Ixion is Browning's Prometheus. The song that breaks from his lips as he whirls upon the penal wheel of Zeus is a great liberating cry of defiance to the phantom-god — man's creature and his ape —

who may plunge the body in torments but can never so baffle the soul but that

> "From the tears and sweat and blood of his torment
> Out of the wreck he rises past Zeus to the Potency o'er him,
> Pallid birth of my pain — where light, where light is, aspiring,
> Thither I rise, whilst thou — Zeus take thy godship and sink."

And in *Never the Time and the Place*, the pang of love's aching void and the rapture of reunion blend in one strain of haunting magical beauty, the song of an old man in whom one memory kindles eternal youth, a song in which, as in hardly another, the wistfulness of autumn blends with the plenitude of spring.

Browning spent the summer months of 1883 at Gressoney St Jean, a lonely spot high up in the Val d'Aosta, living, as usual when abroad, on the plainest of vegetable diet. "Delightful Gressoney!" he wrote,

> "Who laughest, 'Take what is, trust what may be!'"

And a mood of serene acquiescence in keeping with the scene breathes from the poem which occupied him during this pleasant summer. To Browning's old age, as to Goethe's, the calm wisdom and graceful symbolism of Persia offered a peculiar attraction. In the *West-östlicher Divan*, seventy years earlier, Goethe, with a subtler sympathy, laid his finger upon the common germs of Eastern and Western thought and poetry.

Browning, far less in actual touch with the Oriental mind, turned to the East in quest of picturesque habiliments for his very definitely European convictions—"Persian garments," which had to be "changed" in the mind of the interpreting reader.

The *Fancies* have the virtues of good fables,—pithy wisdom, ingenious moral instances, homely illustrations, easy colloquial dialogue; and the ethical teaching has a striking superficial likeness to the common-sense morality of prudence and content, which fables, like proverbs, habitually expound. "Cultivate your garden, don't trouble your head about insoluble riddles, accept your ignorance and your limitations, assume your good to be good and your evil to be evil, be a man and nothing more"—such is the recurring burden of Ferishtah's counsel. But such preaching on Browning's lips always carried with it an implicit assumption that the preacher had himself somehow got outside the human limitations he insisted on; that he could measure the plausibility of man's metaphysics and theology, and distinguish between the anthropomorphism which is to be acquiesced in because we know no better, and that which is to be spurned because we know too much. Ferishtah's thought is a game of hide-and-seek, and its movements have all the dexterity of winding and subterfuge proper to success in that game. Against the vindictive God of the creeds he trusts his human assurance that pain is God's instrument to educate us into pity and love; but when it is asked how a just God can single out sundry fellow-mortals

> "To undergo experience for our sake,
> Just that the gift of pain, bestowed on them,
> In us might temper to the due degree
> Joy's else-excessive largess,"—

instead of admitting a like appeal to the same human assurance, he falls back upon the unfathomable ways of Omnipotence. If the rifts in the argument are in any sense supplied, it is by the brief snatches of song which intervene between the *Fancies*, as the cicada-note filled the pauses of the broken string. These exquisite lyrics are much more adequate expressions of Browning's faith than the dialogues which professedly embody it. They transfer the discussion from the jangle of the schools and the cavils of the market-place to the passionate persuasions of the heart and the intimate experiences of love, in which all Browning's mysticism had its root. Thus Ferishtah's pragmatic, almost philistine, doctrine of "Plot-culture," by which human life is peremptorily walled in within its narrow round of tasks, "minuteness severed from immensity," is followed by the lyric which tells how Love transcends those limits, making an eternity of time and a universe of solitude. Finally, the burden of these wayward intermittent strains of love-music is caught up, with an added intensity drawn from the poet's personal love and sorrow, in the noble Epilogue. As he listens to the call of Love, the world becomes an enchanted place, resounding with the triumph of good and the exultant battle-joy of heroes. But a "chill wind" suddenly disencharms the enchantment, a doubt that buoyant faith might be a mirage conjured up by Love itself:—

> "What if all be error,
> If the halo irised round my head were—Love, thine arms?"

He disdains to answer; for the last words glow with a fire which of itself dispels the chill wind. A faith founded upon love had for Browning a surer guarantee than any founded upon reason; it was secured by that which most nearly emancipated men from the illusions of mortality, and enabled them to see things as they are seen by God.

The *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day* (1887) is a more laboured and, save for one or two splendid episodes, a less remarkable achievement than *Ferishtah.* All the burly diffuseness which had there been held in check by a quasi-oriental ideal of lightly-knit facility and bland oracular pithiness, here has its way without stint, and no more songs break like the rush of birds' wings upon the dusty air of colloquy. Thrusting in between the lyrics of *Ferishtah* and *Asolando*, these *Parleyings* recall those other "people of importance" whose intrusive visit broke in upon "the tenderness of Dante." Neither their importance in their own day nor their relative obscurity, for the most part, in ours, had much to do with Browning's choice. They do not illustrate merely his normal interest in the obscure freaks and out-of-the-way anomalies of history. The doings of these "people" had once been "important" to Browning himself, and the old man's memory summoned up these forgotten old-world friends of his boyhood to be championed or rallied by their quondam disciple. The death of the dearest friend of his later life, J. Milsand, in 1886, probably set these chords vibrating; the book is dedicated to his memory. Perhaps the *Imaginary Conversations* of an older friend and master of Browning's, one even more important in Browning's day and in ours than in his own, and the master of his youth, once more suggested the scheme. But these *Parleyings* are conversations only in name. They are not even monologues of the old brilliantly dramatic kind. All the dramatic zest of converse is gone, the personages are the merest shadows, nothing is seen but the old poet haranguing his puppets or putting voluble expositions of his own cherished dogmas into their wooden lips. We have glimpses of the boy, when not yet able to compass an octave, beating time to the simple but stirring old march of Avison "whilom of Newcastle organist"; and before he has done, the memory masters him, and the pedestrian blank verse breaks into a hymn "rough, rude, robustious, homely heart athrob" to Pym the "man of men." Or he calls up Bernard Mandeville to confute the formidable pessimism of his old friend Carlyle—"whose groan I hear, with guffaw at the end disposing of mock-melancholy." Gerard de Lairesse, whose rococo landscapes had interested him as a boy, he introduces only to typify an outworn way of art—the mythic treatment of nature; but he illustrates this "inferior" way with a splendour of poetry that makes his ironic exposure dangerously like an unwitting vindication. These visions of Prometheus on the storm-swept crag, of Artemis hunting in the dawn, show that Browning was master, if he had cared to use it, of that magnificent symbolic speech elicited from Greek myth in the *Hyperion* or the *Prometheus Unbound.* But it was a foreign idiom to him, and his occasional use of it a *tour de force.*

Two years only now remained for Browning, and it began to be apparent to his friends that his sturdy health was no longer secure. His way of life underwent no change, he was as active in society as ever, and acquaintances, old and new, still claimed his time, and added to the burden, always cheerfully endured, of his correspondence. In October 1887 the marriage of his son attached him by a new tie to Italy, and the Palazzo Rezzonico on the Grand Canal, where "Pen" and his young American wife presently settled, was to be his last, as it was his most magnificent, abode. To Venice he turned his steps each autumn of these last two years; lingering by the way among the mountains or in the beautiful border region at their feet. It was thus that, in the early autumn of 1889, he came yet once again to Asolo. His old friend and hostess, Mrs Arthur Bronson, had discovered a pleasant, airy abode on the old town-wall, overhanging a ravine, and Asolo, seen from this "castle precipice-encurled," recovered all its old magic. It was here that he put together the disconnected pieces, many written during the last two years in London, others at Asolo itself, which were finally published on the day of his death. The Tower of Queen Cornaro still overlooked the little town, as it had done half a century before; and he attached these last poems to the same tradition by giving them the pleasant title said to have been invented by her secretary. *Asolando—Facts and Fancies*, both titles contain a hint of the ageing Browning,—the relaxed physical energy which allows this strenuous waker to dream (*Reverie; Bad Dreams*); the flagging poetic power, whose fitful flashes could no longer transfigure the world for him, but only cast a fantastic flicker at moments across its prosaic features. The opening lines sadly confess the wane of the old vision:—

> "And now a flower is just a flower:
>   Man, bird, beast are but beast, bird, man—
> Simply themselves, uncinct by dower
>   Of dyes which, when life's day began,
> Round each in glory ran."

The famous Epilogue is the last cheer of an old warrior in whom the stout fibre of heroism still held out when the finer nerve of vision decayed; but *A Reverie* shows how heavy a strain it had to endure in sustaining his faith that the world is governed by Love. Of outward evidence for that conviction Browning saw less and less. But age had not dimmed his inner witness, and those subtle filaments of mysterious affinity which, for Browning, bound the love of God for man to the love of man for woman, remained unimpaired. The old man of seventy-seven was still, in his last autumn, singing songs redolent, not of autumn, but of the perfume and the ecstasy of spring and youth,—love-lyrics so illusively youthful that one, not the least competent, of his critics has refused to accept them as work of his old age. Yet *Now* and *Summum Bonum*, and *A Pearl, a Girl*, with all their apparent freshness and spontaneity, are less like rapt utterances of passion than eloquent analyses of it by one who has known it and who still vibrates with the memory. What preoccupies and absorbs him is not the woman, but the wonder of the transfiguration wrought for him by her word or kiss,—the moment made eternal, the "blaze" in which he became "lord of heaven and earth." But some of the greatest love-poetry of the world—from Dante onwards—has reflected an intellect similarly absorbed in articulating a marvellous experience. For the rest, *Asolando* is a miscellany of old and new,—bright loose drift from the chance moods of genius, or bits of anecdotic lumber carefully recovered and refurbished, as in prescience of the nearing end.

Yet no such prescience appears to have been his. His buoyant confidence in his own vitality held its own. He was full of schemes of work. At the end of October the idyllic days at Asolo ended, and Browning repaired for the last time to the Palazzo

Rezzonico. A month later he caught a bronchial catarrh; failure of the heart set in, and on the evening of December 12 he peacefully died. On the last day of the year his body was laid to rest in "Poets' Corner."

PART II.

BROWNING'S MIND AND ART

CHAPTER IX.

THE POET.

Then, who helps more, pray, to repair our loss—
Another Boehme with a tougher book
And subtler meanings of what roses say,—
Or some stout Mage, like him of Halberstadt,
John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about?
He with a "look you!" vents a brace of rhymes,
And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
. . . .
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.
—*Transcendentalism.*

I.

"I HAVE, you are to know," Browning once wrote to Miss Haworth, "such a love for flowers and leaves . . . that I every now and then in an impatience at being unable to possess them thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent,—bite them to bits." "All poetry," he wrote some twenty years later to Ruskin, "is the problem of putting the infinite into the finite." Utterances like these, not conveyed through the lips of some "dramatic" creation, but written seriously in his own person to intimate friends, give us a clue more valuable it may be than some other utterances which are oftener quoted and better known, to the germinal impulses of Browning's poetic work. "Finite" and "infinite" were words continually on his lips, and it is clear that both sides of the antithesis represented instincts rooted in his mental nature, drawing nourishment from distinct but equally fundamental springs of feeling and thought. Each had its stronghold in a particular psychical region. The province and feeding-ground of his passion for "infinity" was that eager and restless self-consciousness which he so vividly described in *Pauline*, seeking to "be all, have, see, know, taste, feel all," to become all natures, like Sordello, yet retain the law of his own being. "I pluck the rose and love it more than tongue can speak," says the lover in *Two in the Campagna*. Browning had his full portion of the romantic idealism which, under the twofold stimulus of literary and political revolution, had animated the poetry of the previous generation. But while he clearly shared the uplifted aspiring spirit of Shelley, it assumed in him a totally different character. Shelley abhors limits, everything grows evanescent and ethereal before his solvent imagination, the infinity he aspires after unveils itself at his bidding, impalpable, undefined, "intense," "inane." Whereas Browning's restlessly aspiring temperament worked under the control of an eye and ear that fastened with peculiar emphasis and eagerness upon all the limits, the dissonances, the angularities that Shelley's harmonising fancy dissolved away The ultimate psychological result was that the brilliant clarity and precision of his imagined forms gathered richness and intensity of suggestion from the vaguer impulses of temperament, and that an association was set up between them which makes it literally true to say that, for Browning, the "finite" is not the rival or the antithesis, but the very language of the "infinite,"—that the vastest and most transcendent realities have for him their *points d'appui* in some bit of intense life, some darting bird or insect, some glowing flower or leaf. Existence ebbs away from the large, featureless, monotonous things, to concentrate itself in a spiked cypress or a jagged mountain cleft. A placid soul without "incidents" arrests him less surely than the fireflies on a mossy bank. Hence, while "the finite" always appears, when explicitly contrasted with "the infinite," as the inferior,—as something *soi-disant* imperfect and incomplete,—its actual status and function in Browning's imaginative world rather resembles that of Plato's *πέρας* in relation to the *ἄπειρον*,—the saving "limit" which gives definite existence to the limitless vague.

II.

Hence Browning, while a romantic in temper, was, in comparison with his predecessors, a thorough realist in method. All the Romantic poets of the previous generation had refused and decried some large portion of reality. Wordsworth had averted his ken from half of human fate; Keats and Shelley turned from the forlornness of human society as it was to the transfigured humanity of myth. All three were out of sympathy with civilisation; and their revolt went much deeper than a distaste for the types of men it bred. They attacked a triumphant age of reason in its central fastness, the brilliant analytic intelligence to which its triumphs were apparently due. Keats declaimed at cold philosophy which undid the rainbow's spells; Shelley repelled the claim of mere understanding to settle the merits of poetry; Wordsworth, the profoundest, though by no means the most cogent or connected, thinker of the three, denounced the "meddling intellect" which murders to dissect, and strove to strip language itself of every element of logic and fancy, as distortions of the truth, only to be uttered in the barest words, which comes to the heart that watches and receives. On all these issues Browning stands in sharp, if not quite absolute, contrast. "Barbarian," as he has been called, and as in a quite intelligible sense he was, he found his poetry pre-eminently among the pursuits, the passions, the interests and problems, of civilised men. His potent gift of imagination never tempted him, during his creative years, to assail the sufficiency of intellect, or to disparage the intellectual and "artificial" elements of speech; on the contrary, he appears from the outset employing in the service of poetry a discursive logic of unsurpassed swiftness and dexterity, and a vast heterogeneous army of words gathered, like a sudden levy, with a sole eye to their effective force, from every corner of civilised life, and wearing the motley of the most prosaic occupations. It was only in the closing years that he began to distrust the power of thought to get a grip upon reality. His delight in poetic argument is often doubtless that of the ironical casuist, looking on at the self-deceptions of a soul; but his interest in ideas was a rooted passion that gave a thoroughly new, and to many readers most unwelcome, "intellectuality" to the whole manner as well as substance of his poetic work.

While Browning thus, in Nietzsche's phrase, said "Yes" to many sides of existence which his Romantic predecessors repudiated or ignored, he had some very definite limitations of his own. He gathered into his verse crowded regions of experience which they neglected; but some very glorious avenues of poetry pursued by them he refused to explore. Himself the most ardent believer in the supernatural among all the great poets of his time, the supernatural, as such, has hardly any explicit place in his poetry. To the eternal beauty of myth and folk-lore,—dream-palaces "never built at all and therefore built for ever,"—all that province of the poetical realm which in the memorable partition of 1797 Coleridge had taken for his own, splendidly emulated by Shelley and by Keats, Browning the Platonist maintained on the whole the attitude of the utilitarian man of facts. "Fairy-poetry," he agreed with Elizabeth Barrett in 1845-46, was "impossible in the days of steam." With a faith in a transcendent divine world as assured as Dante's or Milton's, he did not aspire to "pass the flaming bounds of Space or Time," or "to possess the sun and stars." No reader of *Gerard de Lairesse* at one end of his career, or of the vision of *Paracelsus* at the other, or *Childe Roland* in the middle, can mistake the capacity; but habit is more trustworthy than an occasional *tour de force;* and Browning's imagination worked freely only when it bodied forth a life in accord with the waking experience of his own day. "A poet never dreams," said his philosophical Don Juan, "we prose folk always do"; and the epigram brilliantly announced the character of Browning's poetic world,—the world of prose illuminated through and through in every cranny and crevice by the keenest and most adventurous of exploring intellects.

In physical organisation Browning's endowment was decidedly of the kind which prompts men to "accept the universe" with joyful alacrity. Like his contemporary Victor Hugo, he was, after all reserves have been made, from first to last one of the healthiest and heartiest of men. If he lacked the burly stature and bovine appetite with which young Hugo a little scandalised the delicate sensibilities of French Romanticism, he certainly "came eating and drinking," and amply equipped with nerve and muscle, activity, accomplishment, social instinct, and *savoir faire.* The isolating loneliness of genius was checkmated by a profusion of the talents which put men *en rapport* with their kind. The reader of his biography is apt to miss in it the signs of that heroic or idealist detachment which he was never weary of extolling in his verse. He is the poet *par excellence* of the glory of failure and dissatisfaction; but his life was, in the main, that of one who succeeded and who was satisfied with his success. In the vast bulk of his writings we look in vain for the "broken arc," the "half-told tale," and it is characteristic that he never revised. Even after the great sorrow of his life, the mood of *Prospice*, though it may have underlain all his other moods, did not suppress or transform them; he "lived in the world and loved earth's way," and however assured that this earth is not his only sphere, did not wish

"the wings unfurled
That sleep in the worm, they say."

Whatever affinities Browning may have with the mystic or the symbolist for whom the whole sense-world is but the sign of spiritual realities, it is plain that this way of envisaging existence found little support in the character of his senses. He had not the brooding eye, beneath which, as it gazes, loveliness becomes far lovelier, but an organ aggressively alert, minutely inquisitive, circumstantially exact, which perceived the bearings of things, and explored their intricacies, noted how the mortar was tempered in the walls and if any struck a woman or beat a horse, but was as little prone to transfigure these or other things with the glamour of mysterious suggestion as the eye of Peter Bell himself. He lacked the stranger and subtler sensibilities of eye and ear, to which Nature poetry of the nineteenth century owes so much. His senses were efficient servants to an active brain, not magicians flinging dazzling spells into the air before him or mysterious music across his path. By a curious and not unimportant peculiarity he could see a remote horizon clearly with one eye, and read the finest print in twilight with the other; but he could not, like Wordsworth, hear the "sound of alien melancholy" given out from the mountains before a storm. The implicit realism of his eye and ear was fortified by acute tactual and muscular sensibilities. He makes us vividly aware of surface and texture, of space, solidity, shape. Matter with him is not the translucent, tenuous, half-spiritual substance of Shelley, but aggressively massive and opaque, tense with solidity. And he had in an eminent degree the quick and eager apprehension of space-relations which usually goes with these developed sensibilities of eye and muscle. There is a hint of it in an early anecdote. "Why, sir, you are quite a geographer!" he reported his mother to have said to him when, on his very first walk with her, he had given her an elaborate imaginary account of "his houses and estates."[1] But it was only late in life that this acute plasticity and concreteness of his sensibility found its natural outlet. When in their last winter at Rome (1860-61) he took to clay-modelling, it was with an exultant rapture which for the time thrust poetry into the shade. "The more tired he has been, and the more his back ached, poor fellow," writes his wife, "the more he has exulted and been happy — no, nothing ever made him so happy before."[1] This was the immense joy of one who has at length found the key after half a lifetime of trying at the lock.

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[1] Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 24.

III.

And yet realism as commonly understood is a misleading term for Browning's art. If his keen objective senses penned his imagination, save for a few daring escapades, within the limits of a somewhat normal actuality, it exercised, within those limits, a superb individuality of choice. The acute observer was doubled with a poet whose vehement and fiery energy and intense self-consciousness influenced what he observed, and yet far more what he imagined and what he expressed. It is possible to distinguish four main lines along which this determining bias told. He gloried in the strong sensory-stimulus of glowing colour, of dazzling light; in the more complex *motory*-stimulus of intricate, abrupt, and plastic form,—feasts for the agile eye; in all the signs of power, exciting a kindred joy by sympathy; and in all the signs of conscious life or "soul," exciting a joy which only reaches its height when it is enforced by those more elemental and primitive springs of joy, when he is engaged with souls that glow like a flower or a gem, with souls picturesquely complex and diversified, or vehement, aspiring, heroic. In each of those four domains, light and colour, form, power, soul, Browning had a profound, and in the fullest sense creative, joy, which in endless varieties and combinations dominated his imagination, controlled and pointed its flight, and determined the contents, the manner, and the atmosphere of his poetic work. To trace these operations in detail will be the occupation of the five following sections.

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[1] Mrs Browning's *Letters*, March 1861.

IV.

1. Joy in Light and Colour.

Browning's repute as a thinker and "teacher" long overshadowed his glory as a singer, and it still to some extent impedes the recognition of his bold and splendid colouring. It is true that he is never a colourist pure and simple; his joy in light and colour is never merely epicurean. Poets so great as Keats often seem to sit as luxurious guests at their own feasts of sense; Browning has rather the air of a magnificent dispenser, who "provides and not partakes." His colouring is not subtle; it recalls neither the æthereal opal of Shelley nor the dewy flushing glow and "verdurous glooms" of Keats, nor the choice and cultured splendour of Tennyson; it is bold, simple, and intense. He neglects the indecisive and subdued tones; the mingled hues chiefly found in Nature, or the tender "silvery-grey" of Andrea's placid perfection. He dazzles us with scarlet and crimson; with rubies, and blood, and "the poppy's red effrontery," with topaz, and amethyst, and the glory of gold, makes the sense ache with the lustre of blue, and heightens the effect of all by the boldest contrast. Who can doubt that he fell the more readily upon one of his quaintest titles because of the priestly ordinance that the "Pomegranates" were to be "of blue and of purple and of scarlet," and the "Bells" "of gold"? He loves the daybreak hour of the world's awakening vitality as poets of another temper love the twilight; the splendour of sunrise pouring into the chamber of Pippa, and steeping Florence in that "live translucent bath of air"[1]; he loves the blaze of the Italian midday—

> "Great noontides, thunderstorms, all glaring pomps
> That triumph at the heels of June the god."

Even a violet-bed he sees as a "flash" of "blue."[2] He loves the play of light on golden hair, and rarely imagines womanhood without it, even in the sombre South and the dusky East; Porphyria and Lady Carlisle,

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[1] "I never grow tired of sunrises," he wrote in a letter, recently published, to Aubrey de Vere, in 1851 (*A. de Vere: A Memoir*, by Wilfrid Ward).

[2] *Two Poets of Croisic.*

Evelyn Hope and the maid of Pornic, share the gift with Anael the Druse, with Sordello's Palma, whose

> "tresses curled
> Into a sumptuous swell of gold, and wound
> About her like a glory! even the ground
> Was bright as with spilt sunbeams;"

and the girl in *Love among the Ruins*, and the "dear dead women" of Venice. His love of fire and of the imagery of flame has one of its sources in his love of light. Verona emerges from the gloom of the past as "a darkness kindling at the core." He sees the "pink perfection of the cyclamen," the "rose bloom o'er the summit's front of stone." And, like most painters of the glow of light, he throws a peculiar intensity into his glooms. When he paints a dark night, as in *Pan and Luna*, the blackness is a solid jelly-like thing that can be cut. And even night itself falls short of the pitchy gloom that precedes the Eastern vision, breaking in despair "against the soul of blackness there," as the gloom of Saul's tent discovers within it "a something more black than the blackness," the sustaining tent-pole, and then Saul himself "gigantic and blackest of all."

But mostly the foil is a vivid, even strident, contrast. He sees the "old June weather" blue above, and the

> "great opaque
> Blue breadth of sea without a break"

under the walls of the seaside palazzo in Southern Italy, "where the baked cicala dies of drouth"; and the blue lilies about the harp of golden-haired David; and Solomon gold-robed in the blue abyss of his cedar house, "like the centre spike of gold which burns deep in the blue-bell's womb";[1] and the "gaze of Apollo" through the gloom of Verona woods;[2] he sees the American pampas — "miles and miles of gold and green," "where the sunflowers blow in a solid glow," with a horse—"coal-black"—careering across it; and his swarthy Ethiop uses the yellow poison-wattles of a lizard to divine with.[3] If he imagines the "hairy-gold orbs" of the sorb-fruit, they must be ensconced in "black glossy myrtle-berries," foils in texture as in hue;[4] and he neglects the mellow harmonies of autumnal decay in order to paint the leaf which is like a splash of blood intense, abrupt, across the flame of a golden shield.[5] He makes the most of every hint of contrast he finds, and delights in images which accentuate the rigour of antithesis; Cleon's mingled black and white slaves remind him of a tesselated pavement, and Blougram's fluctuating faith and doubt of a chess-board. And when, long after the tragic break-up of his Italian home, he reverted in thought to Miss Blagden's Florentine garden, the one impression that sifted itself out in his tell-tale memory was of spots of colour and light upon dark backgrounds, — "the herbs in red flower, and the butterflies on the top of the wall under the olive-trees."[6]

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[1] *Popularity.*
[2] *Sordello.*
[3] Ibid.
[4] *Englishman in Italy.*
[5] *By the Fireside.*
[6] Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 258.

Browning's colouring is thus strikingly expressive of the build of his mind, as sketched above. It is the colouring of a realist in so far as it is always caught from life, and never fantastic or mythical. But it is chosen with an instinctive and peremptory bias of eye and imagination—the index of a mind impatient of indistinct confusions and placid harmony, avid of intensity, decision, and conflict.

V.

2. Joy in Form.

If the popular legend of Browning ignores his passion for colour, it altogether scouts the suggestion that he had a peculiar delight in form. By general consent he lacked the most ordinary and decent attention to it. No doubt he is partly responsible for this impression himself. His ideals of literary form were not altogether those commonly recognised in literature. If we understand by form the quality of clear-cut outline and sharply defined articulation, there is a sense in which it was one of the most ingrained instincts of his nature, indulged at times with even morbid excess. Alike in life and in art he hated sloth,—the slovenliness of the "ungirt loin" and of the indecisive touch. In conduct, this animus expressed itself in a kind of punctilious propriety. The forms of social convention Browning observed not merely with the scrupulous respect of the man of fashion, but with the enthusiasm of the virtuoso. Near akin in genius to the high priests of the Romantic temple, Browning rarely, even in the defiant heyday of adolescence, set more than a tentative foot across the outer precincts of the Romantic Bohemia. His "individualism" was not of the type which overflows in easy affectations; he was too original to be eccentric, too profoundly a man of letters to look "like a damned literary man." In his poetry this animus took a less equivocal shape. Not a little, both of its vividness and of its obscurity, flows from the undisciplined exuberance of his joy in form. An acute criticism of Mrs Browning's—in some points the very best critic he ever had—puts one aspect of this admirably. *The Athenæum* had called him "misty." "Misty," she retorts, "is an infamous word for your kind of obscurity. You never are misty, not even in *Sordello*—never vague. Your graver cuts deep sharp lines, always,—and there is an extra distinctness in your images and thoughts, from the midst of which, crossing each other infinitely, the general significance seems to escape."[1] That is the overplus of form producing obscurity. But through immense tracts of Browning the effect of the extra-distinctness of his images and thoughts, of the deep sharp lines cut by his graver, is not thus frustrated, but tells to the full in amazingly vivid and unforgettable expression. Yet he is no more a realist of the ordinary type here than in his colouring. His deep sharp lines are caught from life, but under the control of a no less definite bias of eye and brain. Sheer nervous and muscular energy had its part here also. As he loved the intense colours which most vigorously stimulate the optic nerve, so he delighted in the angular, indented, intertwining, labyrinthine varieties of line and surface which call for the most delicate, and at the same time the most agile, adjustments of the muscles of the eye. He caught at the edges of things —the white line of foam against the shore, the lip of the shell, and he could compare whiteness as no other poet ever did to "the bitten lip of hate." He once saw with delight "a solitary bee nipping a leaf round till it exactly fitted the front of a hole."[1] Browning's joy in form was as little epicurean as his joy in colour; it was a banquet of the senses in which the sense of motion and energy had the largest part. Smooth, flowing, rounded, undulating outlines, which the eye glides along without check, are insipid and profitless to him, and he "welcomes the rebuff" of every jagged excrescence or ragged fray, of every sudden and abrupt breach of continuity. His eye seizes the crisp indentations of ferns as they "fit their teeth to the polished block" of a grey boulder-stone;[2] seizes the "sharp-curled" olive-leaves as they "print the blue sky" above the morning glories of Florence;[3] seizes the sharp zigzag of lightning against the Italian midnight, the fiery west through a dungeon grating or a lurid rift in the clouds,[4]—"one gloom, a rift of fire, another gloom,"—the brilliant line of Venice suspended "between blue and blue." "Cup-mosses and ferns and spotty yellow leaves—all that I love heartily," he wrote to E. B. B.[1] Roses and moss strike most men's senses by a soft luxuriance in which all sharp articulation of parts is merged; but what Browning seizes on in the rose is its "labyrinthine" intricacy, while the moss becomes a little forest of "fairy-cups and elf needles." And who else would have thought of saying that "the fields look *rough* with hoary dew"?[2] In the *Easter-Day* vision he sees the sky as a network of black serrated ridges. He loves the intricate play of light and shade, and the irregular, contorted, honeycombed surface which produces it; craggy, scarred, indented mountains, "like an old lion's cheek-teeth";[3] old towns with huddled roofs and towers picked out "black and crooked," like "fretwork," or "Turkish verse along a scimitar"; old walls, creviced and crannied, intertwined with creepers, and tenanted by crossing swarms of ever-busy flies,—such things are the familiar commonplace of Browning's sculpturesque fancy. His metrical movements are full of the same joy in "fretwork" effects—verse-rhythm and sense-rhythm constantly crossing where the reader expects them to coincide.[4]

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[1] *E. B. to R. B.*, Jan. 19, 1846.

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[1] *To E. B. B.*, Jan. 5, 1846.

[2] *By the Fireside.*

[3] *Old Pictures in Florence.*

[4] *Sordello*, i. 181.

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[1] Jan. 5, 1846, apropos of a poem by Horne. The "love" may refer to Horne's description of these things, but it matters little for the present purpose.

[2] *Home Thoughts.*

[3] *Karshish*, i. 515. Cf. *Englishman in Italy*, i. 397.

[4] Cf., *e.g.*, his treatment of the six-line stanza.

Nor was his imaginative sculpture confined to low-relief. Every rift in the surface catches his eye, and the deeper and more intricate the recess, the more curiously his insinuating fancy explores it. Sordello's palace is "a maze of corridors,"—"dusk winding-stairs, dim galleries." He probes the depths of the flower-bell; he pries after the warmth and scent that lie within the "loaded curls" of his lady, and irradiates the lizard, or the gnome,[1] in its rock-chamber, the bee in its amber drop,[2] or in its bud,[3] the worm in its clod. When Keats describes the closed eyes of the sleeping Madeline he is content with the loveliness he sees:—

> "And still she slept an *azure-lidded* sleep."

Browning's mining fancy insists on showing us the eye of the dead Porphyria "ensconced" within its eyelid, "like a bee in a bud." A cleft is as seductive to his imagination as a cave to Shelley's. In a cleft of the wind-gashed Apennines he imagines the home he would best love in all the world;[4] in a cleft the pine-tree, symbol of hardy song,[5] strikes precarious root, the ruined eagle finds refuge,[6] and Sibrandus Schaffnaburgensis a watery Inferno. A like instinct allures him to other images of deep hollow things the recesses of which something else explores and occupies,—the image of the sheath; the image of the cup. But he is equally allured by the opposite, or salient, kind of angularity. Beside the Calabrian seaside house stands a "sharp tree—a cypress—rough iron-spiked, ripe fruit o'er-crusted,"—in all points a thoroughly Browningesque tree.

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[1] *Sordello.*

[2] This turn of fancy was one of his points of affinity with Donne; cf. *R. B. to E. B. B.*, i. 46: "Music should enwrap the thought, as Donne says an amber drop enwraps a bee."

[3] *Porphyria.*

[4] *De Gustibus.*

[5] *Pan and Luna.*

[6] E.g., *Balaustion's Adventure;* Proem.

And so, corresponding to the cleft-like array of sheaths and cups, a not less prolific family of *spikes* and *wedges* and *swords* runs riot in Browning's work. The rushing of a fresh river-stream into the warm ocean tides crystallises into the "crystal spike between two warm walls of wave;"[1] "air thickens," and the wind, grown solid, "edges its wedge in and in as far as the point would go."[2] The fleecy clouds embracing the flying form of Luna clasp her as close "as dented spine fitting its flesh."[3] The fiery agony of John the heretic is a plucking of sharp spikes from his rose.[4] Lightning is a bright sword, plunged through the pine-tree roof. And Mont Blanc himself is half effaced by his "earth-brood" of aiguilles,—"needles red and white and green, Horns of silver, fangs of crystal, set on edge in his demesne."[5]

Browning's joy in abrupt and intricate form had then a definite root in his own nervous and muscular energy. It was no mere preference which might be indulged or not, but an instinctive bias, which deeply affected his way not only of imagining but of conceiving the relations of things. In this brilliant visual speech of sharply cut

[1] *Caliban on Setebos.*
[2] *A Lover's Quarrel.*
[3] *Pan and Luna.*
[4] *The Heretic's Tragedy.*
[5] *La Saisiaz.*

angles and saliences, of rugged incrustations, and labyrinthine multiplicity, Browning's romantic hunger for the infinite had to find its expression; and it is clear that the bias implicit in speech imposed itself in some points upon the matter it conveyed. Abrupt demarcations cut off soul from body, and man from God; the infinite habitually presented itself to him as something, not transcending and comprehending the finite, but *beginning where the finite stopped*,—Eternity at the end of Time. But the same imaginative passion for form which imposed some concrete limitations upon the Absolute deprived it also of the vagueness of abstraction. Browning's divinity is very finite, but also amazingly real and near; not "interfused" with the world, which is full of stubborn distinctness, but permeating it through and through, "curled inextricably round about" all its beauty and its power,[1] "intertwined" with earth's lowliest existence, and thrilling with answering rapture to every throb of life. The doctrine of God's "immanence" was almost a commonplace with Browning's generation. Browning turned the doctrine into imaginative speech equalled in impressiveness by that of Carlyle and by that of Emerson, but distinguished from both by an eager articulating concrete sensibility which lifts into touch with supreme Good all the labyrinthine multiplicity of existence which Carlyle impatiently suppressed, while it joyously accentuates the sharp dissonances which Emerson's ideality ignored.

[1] *Easter-Day*, xxx.

VI.

3. Joy in Power.

Browning was thus announced, we have seen, even by his splendour of colouring and his rich and clear-cut plasticity, as something more than a feaster upon colour and form. In his riot of the senses there was more of the athlete than of the voluptuary. His joy was that of one to whom nervous and muscular tension was itself a stimulating delight. In such a temperament the feeling of energy was an elementary instinct, a passionate obsession, which projected itself through eye and ear and imagination into the outer world, filling it with the throbbing pulsations or the clashing conflict of vehement powers. We know that it was thus with Browning. "From the first Power was, I knew," he wrote in the last autumn of his life.[1] It was a primitive instinct, and it remained firmly rooted to the last. As Wordsworth saw Joy everywhere, and Shelley Love, so Browning saw Power. If he later "saw Love as plainly," it was the creative and transforming, not the emotional, aspect of Love which caught his eye. His sense of Power played a yet more various part in the shaping of his poetic world than did his sense of form. But intellectual growth inevitably modified the primitive instinct which it could not uproot; and his sense of Power traverses the whole gamut of dynamic tones, from the lusty "barbaric" joy in the sheer violence of ripping and clashing, to the high-wrought sensibility which throbs in sympathy with the passionate heart-beats of the stars.

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[1] *Asolando: Reverie.*

No one can miss the element of savage energy in Browning. His associates tell us of his sudden fits of indignation, "which were like thunder-storms"; of his "brutal scorn" for effeminacy, of the "vibration of his loud voice, and his hard fist upon the table," which made short work of cobwebs.[1] The impact of hard resisting things, the jostlings of stubborn matter bent on going its own way, attracted him as the subtle compliances of air appealed to Shelley; and he runs riot in the vocabulary (so abundantly developed in English) which conveys with monosyllabic vigour to the ear these jostlings and impacts.

> "Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage;
> Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank
> Soil to a plash?"

he asks in *Childe Roland*,—altogether an instructive example of the ways of Browning's imagination when working, as it so rarely did, on a deliberately fantastic theme. Hear again with what savage joy his Moon "rips the womb" of the cloud that crosses it; Shelley's Moon, in keeping with the ways of his more tender-hefted universe, merely *broke its woof*. So the gentle wife of James Lee sees in a vineyard "the vines writhe in rows each impaled on its stake."

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[1] Mr E. Gosse, in *Dict. of N.B.*

His "clefts" and "wedges" owe their attraction not only to their intricate angularity but to the violent cleavings and thrustings apart which they result from or produce. And his clefts are as incomplete without some wild bit of fierce or frightened life in their grip as are Shelley's caves without some form of unearthly maidenhood in their embrace.[1] His mountains—so rarely the benign pastoral presences of Wordsworth—are not only craggy and rough, but invisible axes have hewn and mutilated them,—they are fissured and cloven and "scalped" and "wind-gashed." When they thrust their mighty feet into the plain and "entwine base with base to knit strength more intensely,"[2] the image owes its grandeur to the double suggestion of sinewy power and intertwined limbs. Still grander, but in the same style, is the sketch of Hildebrand in *Sordello*:—

> "See him stand
> Buttressed upon his mattock, Hildebrand
> Of the huge brain-mask welded ply o'er ply
> As in a forge; . . . teeth clenched,
> The neck tight-corded too, the chin deep-trenched,
> As if a cloud enveloped him while fought
> Under its shade, grim prizers, thought with thought
> At deadlock."[3]

When the hoary cripple in *Childe Roland* laughs, his mouth-edge is "pursed and scored" with his glee; and his scorn must not merely be uttered, but *written* with his crutch "in the dusty thoroughfare." This idea is resumed yet more dramatically in the image of the palsied oak, cleft like "a distorted mouth that splits its rim gaping at death." Later on, thrusting his spear into the gloom, he fancies it "tangled in a dead man's hair or beard." Similarly, Browning is habitually lured into expressive detail by the idea of smooth surfaces frayed or shredded,—as of flesh torn with teeth or spikes: Akiba,—

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[1] Cf. *Prometheus Unbound*, passim.

[2] *Saul.*

[3] *Sordello*, i. 171.

> "the comb
> Of iron carded, flesh from bone, away,"[1]

or Hippolytus, ruined on the "detested beach" that was "bright with blood and morsels of his flesh."[2]

This savageness found vent still more freely in his rendering of sounds. By one of those apparent paradoxes which abound in Browning, the poet who has best interpreted the glories of music in verse, the poet of musicians *par excellence*, is also the poet of grindings and jostlings, of jars and clashes, of grating hinges and flapping doors; civilisation mated with barbarism, "like Jove in a thatched house."

Music appealed to him by its imaginative suggestiveness, or by its intricate technique; as the mine from which Abt Vogler reared his palace, the loom on which Master Hugues wove the intertwining harmonies of his fugue. But the most dulcet harmony aroused him less surely to vivacious expression than some "gruff hinge's invariable scold,"[3] or the quick sharp

[1] *Joch. Halk.* [2] *Artemis Prol.* [3] *Christmas Eve*, i. 480.

rattle of rings down the net-poles,[1] or the hoof-beat of a galloping horse, or the grotesque tumble of the old organist, in fancy, down the "rotten-runged, rat-riddled stairs" of his lightless loft. There was much in him of his own Hamelin rats' alacrity of response to sounds "as of scraping tripe" and squeezing apples, and the rest. Milton contrasted the harmonious swing of the gates of Paradise with the harsh grinding of the gates of hell. Browning would have found in the latter a satisfaction subtly allied to his zest for other forms of robust malignity.

And with his joy in savage images went an even more pronounced joy in savage words. He loved the grinding, clashing, and rending sibilants and explosives as Tennyson the tender-hefted liquids. Both poets found their good among Saxon monosyllables, but to Tennyson they appealed by limpid simplicity, to Browning by gnarled and rugged force. Dante, in a famous chapter of the *De Vulgari Eloquio*,[2] laid down a fourfold distinction among words on the analogy of the varying texture of the hair; enjoining the poet to avoïd both the extremes of smoothness and roughness,—to prefer the "combed" and the "shaggy" to the "tousled" and the "sleek." All four kinds had their function in the versatile technique of Browning and Tennyson; but it is safe to say that while Tennyson's vocabulary is focussed among the "combed" in the direction of the "sleek," Browning's centres in the "shaggy," verging towards the "tousled."[1] The utmost sweetness is his when he will; it is the counterpart of his pure intensity of colouring, and of the lyric loveliness of his Pippas and Pompilias; but

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[1] *Englishman in Italy*, i. 396.

[2] *De Vulg. Eloq.*, ii. 8.

"All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of
one bee,"

though genuine Browning, is not distinctively and unmistakably his, like

"Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-
crammed beast?"

Browning's genial violence continually produced strokes which only needed a little access of oddity or extravagance to become grotesque. He probably inherited a bias in this direction; we know that his father delighted in drawing grotesque heads, and even "declared that he could not draw a pretty face."[2] But his grotesqueness is never the mere comic oddness which sometimes assumes the name. It is a kind of monstrosity produced not by whimsical mutilations, but by a riot of exuberant power. And he has also a grave and tragic use of the grotesque, in which he stands alone. He is, in fact, by far the greatest English master of grotesque. *Childe Roland*, where the natural bent of his invention has full fling, abounds with grotesque traits which, instead of disturbing the romantic atmosphere, infuse into it an element of strange, weird, and uncanny mirth, more unearthly than any solemnity; the day shooting its grim red leer across the plain, the old worn-out horse with its red, gaunt, and colloped neck a-strain; or, in *Paracelsus*, the "Cyclops-like" volcanoes "staring together with their eyes on flame," in whose "uncouth pride" God tastes a pleasure. Shelley had recoiled from the horrible idea of a host of these One-eyed monsters;[1] Browning deliberately invokes it. But he can use grotesque effects to heighten tragedy as well as romance. One source of the peculiar poignancy of the *Heretic's Tragedy* is the eerie blend in it of mocking familiarity and horror.

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[1] Making allowance, of course, for the more "shaggy" and "tousled" character of the English vocabulary as a whole, compared with Italian.

[2] H. Corkran, *Celebrities and I.*

Yet it was not always in this brutal and violent guise that Browning imagined power. He was "ever a fighter," and had a sense as keen as Byron's, and far more joyous, for storm and turbulence; but he had also, as Byron had not, the finer sense which feels the universe tense with implicit energies, and the profoundest silences of Nature oppressive with the burden of life straining to the birth. The stars in *Saul* "beat with emotion" and "shot out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge," and a "gathered intensity" is "brought to the grey of the hills"; upon the lovers of *In a Balcony* evening comes "intense with yon first trembling star." Wordsworth's "quiet" is lonely, pensive, and serene; his stars are not beating with emotion, but "listening quietly." Browning's is hectic, bodeful, high-strung. The vast featureless Campagna is instinct with "passion," and its "peace with joy."[1]

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[1] Cf. Locock, *Examination of the Shelley MSS. in the Bodleian*, p. 19. At the words "And monophalmic (*sic*) Polyphemes who haunt the pine-hills, flocked," the writing becomes illegible and the stanza is left incomplete. Mr Forman explains the breaking-off in the same way.

> "Quietude—that's a universe in germ—
> The dormant passion needing but a look
> To burst into immense life."[2]

Half the romantic spell of *Childe Roland* lies in the wonderful suggestion of impending catastrophe. The gloom is alive with mysterious and impalpable menace; the encompassing presences which everything suggests and nothing betrays, grow more and more oppressively real, until the decisive moment when Roland's blast suddenly lets them loose.

For the power that Browning rejoiced to imagine was pre-eminently sudden; an unforeseen cataclysm, abruptly changing the conditions it found, and sharply marking off the future from the past. The same bias of imagination which crowded his inner vision of space with abrupt angular forms tended to resolve the slow, continuous, organic energies of the world before his inner vision into explosion and catastrophe. His geology neglects the æons of gradual stratification; it is not the slow stupendous upheaval of continents, but the volcanic uprush of the molten ore among the rocks, which renew the ancient rapture of the Paracelsian God. He is the poet of the sudden surprises of plant-life: the bud "bursting unaware" into flower, the brushwood about the elm-tree breaking, some April morning, into tiny leaf, the rose-flesh mushroom born in a night. The "metamorphoses of plants,"[1] which fascinated Goethe by their inner continuity, arrest Browning by their outward abruptness: that the flower is implicit in the leaf was a fact of much less worth for him than that the bud suddenly passes into something so unlike it as the flower. The gradual coming on of spring among the mountains concentrates itself for him in one instant of epic sublimity,—that in which the mountain unlooses its year's load of sound, and

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[1] *Two in the Campagna.*

[2] *Asolando: Inapprehensiveness.*

> "Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously down to
> his feet."[2]

Even in the gradual ebb of day he discovers a pregnant instant in which day dies:—

> "For note, when evening shuts,
> A certain moment cuts
> The deed off, calls the glory from the grey."

Hence his love of images which convey these sudden transformations,—the worm, putting forth in autumn its "two wondrous winglets,"[3] the "transcendental platan," breaking into foliage and flower at the summit of its smooth tall bole; the splendour of flame leaping from the dull fuel of gums and straw. In such images we see how the simple joy in abrupt changes of sensation which belonged to his riotous energy of nerve lent support to his peremptory way of imagining all change and especially all vital and significant becoming. For Browning's trenchant imagination things were not gradually evolved; a sudden touch loosed the springs of latent power, or an overmastering energy from without rushed in like a flood. With all his connoisseur's delight in technique, language and sound were only spells which unlocked a power beyond their capacity to express. Music was the "burst of pillared cloud by day and pillared fire by night," starting up miraculously from the barren wilderness of mechanical expedients,[1] and poetry "the sudden rose"[2] "breaking in" at the bidding of a "brace of rhymes." That in such transmutations Browning saw one of the most marvellous of human powers we may gather from the famous lines of *Abt Vogler* already quoted:—

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[1] *Metamorphose der Pflanzen.*

[2] *Saul.*

[3] *Sordello* (Works, i. 123).

> "And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
> That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star."

VII.

4. Joy in Soul.

No saying of Browning's is more familiar than that in which he declared "incidents in the development of souls"[1] to be to him the supreme interest of poetry. The preceding sections of this chapter have sufficiently shown how far this formula was from exhausting the vital springs of Browning's work. "Little else" might be "worth study"; but a great many other things had captured those rich sensibilities, without which the "student's analytic zeal" might have devoured the poet. On the other hand, his supreme interest in "incidents in the development of souls" was something very different from the democratic enthusiasm for humanity, or the Wordsworthian joy in the "common tears and mirth" of "every village." The quiet routine existence of uneventful lives hardly touched him more than the placid quiescence of animal and vegetable existence; the commonplace of humanity excited in him no mystic rapture; the human "primrose by the river's brim," merely as one among a throng, was for him pretty much what it was to Peter Bell. There was no doubt a strain of pantheistic thought in Browning which logically involved a treatment of the commonplace as profoundly reverent as Wordsworth's own. But his passionate faith in the divine love pervading the universe did not prevent his turning away resolutely from regions of humanity, as of nature, for which his poetic alchemy provided no solvent. His poetic throne was not built on "humble truth"; and he, as little as his own Sordello, deserved the eulogy of the plausible Naddo upon his verses as based "on man's broad nature," and having a "staple of common-sense."[1] The homely toiler as such, all members of homely undistinguished classes and conditions of men, presented, *as* embodiments of those classes and conditions, no coign of vantage to his art. In this point, human-hearted and democratic as he was, he fell short not only of the supreme portrayers of the eternal commonplaces of peasant life,—of a Burns, a Wordsworth, a Millet, a Barnes,—but even of the fastidious author of *The Northern Farmer.* Once, in a moment of exaltation, at Venice, Browning had seen Humanity in the guise of a poor soiled and faded bit of Venetian girlhood, and symbolically taken her as the future mistress of his art. The programme thus laid down was not, like Wordsworth's similarly announced resolve to sing of "sorrow barricadoed evermore within the walls of cities," simply unfulfilled; but it was far from disclosing the real fountain of his inspiration.

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[1] *Fifine*, xlii.

[2] *Transcendentalism.*

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[1] Preface to *Sordello*, ed. 1863.

And as Browning deals little with the commonplace in human nature, so he passes by with slight concern the natural relationships into which men are born, as compared with those which they enter by passion or choice. The bond of kinship, the love between parents and children, brothers and sisters, so prolific of poetry elsewhere, is singularly rare and unimportant in Browning, to whom every other variety of the love between men and women was a kindling theme. The names of husband, of wife, of lover, vibrate for him with a poetry more thrilling than any that those names excite elsewhere in the poetry of his generation; but the mystic glory which in Blake and Wordsworth and Coleridge gathered about unconscious childhood is all but fled. Children — real children, naïve and inarticulate, like little Fortù—rarely appear in his verse, and those that do appear seem to have been first gently disengaged, like Pippa, David, Theocrite, from all the clinging filaments of Home. In its child pathos *The Pied Piper*—addressed to a child—stands all but alone among his works. His choicest and loveliest figures are lonely and unattached. Pippa, David, Pompilia, Sordello, Paracelsus, Balaustion, Mildred, Caponsacchi, have no ties of home and blood, or only such as work malignly upon their fate. Mildred has no mother, and she falls; Sordello moves like a Shelleyan shadow about his father's house; Balaustion breaks away from the ties of kindred to become a spiritual daughter of Athens; Paracelsus goes forth, glorious in the possession of "the secret of the world," which is his alone; Caponsacchi, himself sisterless and motherless, releases Pompilia from the doom inflicted on her by her parents' calculating greed; the song of Pippa releases Luigi from the nobler but yet hurtful bondage of his mother's love.

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[1] *Sordello,* ii. 135.

More considerable, but yet relatively slight, is the part played in Browning's poetry by those larger and more complex communities, like the City or the State, whose bond of membership, though less involuntary than that of family, is still for the most part the expression of material necessity or interest, not of spiritual discernment, passion, or choice. Patriotism, in this sense, is touched with interest but hardly with conviction, or with striking power, by Browning. Casa Guidi windows betrayed too much. Two great communities alone moved his imagination profoundly; just those two, namely, in which the bond of common political membership was most nearly merged in the bond of a common spiritual ideal. And Browning puts the loftiest passion for Athens in the mouth of an alien, and the loftiest Hebraism in the mouth of a Jew of the dispersion. Responsive to the personal cry of the solitary hero, Browning rarely caught or cared to reproduce the vaguer multitudinous murmur of the great mass. In his defining, isolating imagination the voice of the solitary soul rings out with thrilling clearness, but the "still sad music of humanity" escapes. The inchoate and the obsolescent, the indistinctness of immaturity, the incipient disintegration of decay, the deepening shadow of oblivion, the half-instinctive and organic bond of custom, whatever stirs the blood but excites only blurred images in the brain, and steals into character without passing through the gates of passion or of thought, finds imperfect or capricious reflection in his verse.

Browning's interest in "soul" was not, then, a diffused enjoyment of human nature as such. But, on the other hand, human nature stood for too much with him, his sense of what all personality at the lowest implies was too keen, to allow him to relish, or make much use of, those unpsychological amalgams of humanity and thought,—the personified abstractions. Whether in the base form branded by Wordsworth, or in the lofty and noble form of Keats's "Autumn" and Shelley's "West Wind," this powerful instrument of poetic expression was touched only in fugitive and casual strokes to music by Browning's hand. Personality, to interest him, had to possess a possible status in the world of experience. It had to be of the earth, and like its inhabitants. The stamp of fashioning intelligence, or even of blind myth-making instinct, alienates and warns him off. He climbs to no Olympus or Valhalla, he wanders through no Empyrean. His rare divinities tread the visible and solid ground. His Artemis "prologizes" to, his Herakles plays a part in, a human drama; and both are as frankly human themselves as the gods of Homer. Shelley and Keats had rekindled about the faded forms of the Greek gods the elemental Nature-worship from which they had started; Apollo, Hyperion, are again glorious symbols of the "all-seeing" and all-vitalising Sun. Browning, far from seeking to recover their primitive value, treats their legends, with the easy rationalism of Euripides or Ferishtah, as a mine of ethical and psychological illustration. He can play charmingly, in later years, with the myth of Pan and Luna, of Arion and the dolphin,[1] or of Apollo and the Fates, but idyl gets the better of nature feeling; "maid-moon" Luna is far more maid than moon. The spirit of autumn does not focus itself for him, as for Keats, in some symbolic shape, slumbering among the harvest swathes or at watch over the fragrant cider-press; it breaks up into the vivid concrete traits of *The Englishman in Italy.* The spirit of humanity is not shadowed forth in a Prometheus, but realised in a Caponsacchi.

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[1] *Fifine at the Fair*, lxxviii.

VIII.

What, then, in the vast multifarious field of soul-life were the points of special attraction for Browning? To put it in a word, the same fundamental instincts of the senses and the imagination which we have watched shaping the visible world of his poetry, equally determined the complexion of its persons. The joy in pure and intense colour, in abruptness of line and intricacy of structure, in energetic movement and sudden disclosure and transformation, — all these characteristics have their analogies in Browning's feeling for the complexion, morphology, and dynamics of what he calls the soul. Just as this lover of crowded labyrinthine forms surprises us at first by his masses of pure and simple colour, untroubled by blur or modulation, so in the long procession of Browning's men of the world, adepts in the tangled lore of experience, there mingle from time to time figures radiant with a pure, intense, immaculate spiritual light,—Pippa, Pompilia, the David of the earlier *Saul.* Something of the strange charm of these naïvely beautiful beings springs from their isolation. That detachment from the bonds of home and kindred which was noticed above in its negative aspect, appears now as a source of positive expressiveness. They start into unexplained existence like the sudden beauty of flames from straw. Browning is no poet of the home, but he is peculiarly the poet of a kind of spirituality which subsists independently of earthly ties without disdaining them, lonely but unconscious of loneliness. Pippa would hardly be so recognisably steeped as she is in the very atmosphere of Browning's mind, but for this loneliness of hers,—the loneliness neither of the exile nor of the anchorite, but native, spontaneous, and serene. Wordsworth sometimes recalls it, but he is apt to invest his lonely beings with a mystic glamour which detaches them from humanity as well as from their fellowmen. The little "H. C., six years old," is "a dewdrop which the morn brings forth," that

> "at the touch of wrong, without a strife,
> Slips in a moment out of life."

Pippa, with all her ideality and her upward gaze, has her roots in earth; she is not the dewdrop but the flower.

But loneliness belongs in a less degree to almost all characters which seriously engaged Browning's imagination. His own intense isolating self-consciousness infused itself into them. Each is a little island kingdom, judged and justified by its own laws, and not entirely intelligible to the foreigner. Hence his persistent use of the dramatic monologue. Every man had his point of view, and his right to state his case. "Where you speak straight out," Browning wrote in effect, as we saw, in one of his earliest letters to his future wife, "I break the white light in the seven colours of men and women"[1]; and each colour had its special truth and worth. His study of character is notoriously occupied with failures of transit between mind and mind. His lovers miss the clue; if they find it, as in *By the Fireside*, the collapse of the barrier walls is told with triumph, and the spell of the forests invoked to explain it.

And within the viewless intrenchments thus drawn about character Browning's imagination was prone to reproduce the abrupt and intricate play of line and surface which fascinated his outward eye. "The care-bit, erased, broken-up beauties ever took my taste," says, in *Sordello*, the creator of the pure flame-like soul-beauty of Pompilia and Pippa; very much as the crumbling and blistering of the frescoed walls are no less needful to the charm he feels in his Southern villa than the "blue breadth of sea without break" expanding before it. The abruptness, the sharp transitions, the startling and picturesque contrasts which mark so much of the talk of his persons, reflect not merely his agility of mind but his æsthetic relish for the Gothic richness and fretted intricacy that result. The bishop of St Praxed's monologue, for instance, is a sort of live mosaic,—anxious entreaty to his sons, diapered with gloating triumph over old Gandulph. The larger tracts of soul-life are apt in his hands to break up into shifting phases, or to nodulate into sudden crises; here a Blougram, with his "chess-board" of faith diversified by doubt, there a Paracelsus, advancing by complex alternations of "aspiring" and "attainment." Everywhere in Browning the slow continuities of existence are obscured by vivid moments,—the counterpart of his bursts of sunlight through rifts and chinks. A moment of speech with Shelley stands out, a brilliant handbreadth of time between the blank before and after; a moment of miserable failure blots out the whole after-life of Martin Relph; a moment of heroism stamps once for all the quality of Clive; the whole complex story of Pompilia focuses in the "splendid minute and no more" in which she is "saved"; the lover's whole life is summed up in "some moment's product" when "the soul declares itself,"[1] or utters the upgarnered poetry of its passion; or else, conversely, he looks back on a moment equally indelible, when the single chance of love was missed. "It once might have been, once only," is the refrain of the lover's regret in Browning, as "once and only once and for one only" is the keynote of his triumph. In the contours of event and circumstance, as in those of material objects, he loves jagged angularity, not harmonious curve. "Our interest's in the dangerous edge of things,"—

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[1] *R. B. to E. B. B.*, i. 6.

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[1] *By the Fireside.*

> "The honest thief, the tender murderer,
> The superstitious atheist;"

where an alien strain violently crosses the natural course of kind; and these are only extreme examples of the abnormal nature which always allured and detained Browning's imagination, though it was not always the source of its highest achievement. Ivánovitch, executing justice under the forms of murder, Caponsacchi, executing mercy under the forms of an elopement, the savagery of Halbert and Hob unnerved by an abrupt reminiscence,—it is in these suggestive and pregnant situations, at the meeting-points of apparently irreconcilable classes and kinds, that Browning habitually found or placed those of his characters who represent any class or kind at all.

The exploring, in-and-out scrutinising instincts of Browning's imagination equally left their vivid impress upon his treatment of character. If the sharp nodosities of character caught his eye, its mysterious recesses and labyrinthine alleys allured his curiosity; this lover of "clefts," this pryer among tangled locks and into the depths of flower-bells, peered into all the nooks and chambers of the soul with inexhaustible enterprise. It is hard to deny that even *The Ring and the Book* itself suffers something from the unflagging zest with which the poet pursues all the windings of popular speculation, all the fretwork of Angelo de Hyacinthis's forensic and domestic futilities. The poem is a great poetic Mansion, with many chambers, and he will lead us sooner or later to its inner shrine; but on the way there are "closets to search and alcoves to importune,"—

"The day wears,
And door succeeds door,
We try the fresh fortune,
Range the wide house from the wing to the centre."

For the most part, after the not wholly successful experiment of direct analysis in *Sordello*, he chose to make his men and women the instruments of their own illumination; and this was a second source of his delight in the dramatic monologue. He approached all problematic character with a bias towards disbelieving appearances, which was fed, if not generated, by that restlessly exploring instinct of an imagination that spontaneously resolved surface and solidity into integument and core. Not that Browning always displays the core; on the contrary, after elaborately removing an imposing mask from what appears to be a face, he will hint that the unmasked face is itself a mask. "For Blougram, he believed, say, half he spoke." Browning is less concerned to "save" the subjects of his so-called "Special Pleadings" than to imagine them divested of the gross disguises of public rumour about them; not naked as God made them, but clothed in the easy undress of their own subtly plausible illusions about themselves. But the optimist in him is always alert, infusing into the zest of exploration a cheery faith that behind the last investiture lurks always some soul of goodness, and welcoming with a sudden lift of verse the escape of some diviner gleam through the rifts, such as Blougram's—

> "Just when we're safest comes a sunset touch."

Yet it is hardly a paradox to say that his faith throve upon the obstacles it overcame. He imagined yet more vividly than he saw, and the stone wall which forbade vision but whetted imagination, acquired an ideal merit in his eyes because it was not an open door. In later life he came with growing persistence to regard the phenomenal world as a barrier of illusion between man and truth. But instead of chilling his faith, the obstacle only generated that poet's philosophy of the "value of a lie" which perturbs the less experienced reader of *Fifine*. "Truth" was "forced to manifest itself through falsehood," won thence by the excepted eye, at the rare season, for the happy moment, till "through the shows of sense, which ever proving false still promise to be true," the soul of man worked its way to its final union with the soul of God.[1]

And here at length if not before we have a clear glimpse of the athlete who lurks behind the explorer. Browning's joy in imagining impediment and illusion was only another aspect of his joy in the spiritual energy which answers to the spur of difficulty and "works" through the shows of sense; and this other joy found expression in a poetry of soul yet more deeply tinged with the native hue of his mind. "From the first, Power was, I knew;" and souls were the very central haunt and focus of its play. Not that strong natures, as such, have much part in Browning's poetic-world; the strength that allured his imagination was not the strength that is rooted in nerve or brain, slowly enlarging with the build of the organism, but the strength that has suddenly to be begotten or infused, that leaps by the magic of spiritual influence from heart to heart. If Browning multiplies and deepens the demarcations among material things, he gives his souls a rare faculty of transcending them. Bright spiritual beings like Pippa shed their souls innocently and unwittingly about like a spilth of "X-rays," and the irradiation penetrates instantly the dense opposing integuments of passion, cupidity, and worldliness. At all times in his life these accesses of spiritual power occupied his imagination. Cristina's momentary glance and the Lady of Tripoli's dreamed-of face lift their devotees to completeness:—

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[1] *Fifine at the Fair*, cxxiv.

> "She has lost me, I have gained her,
> Her soul's mine, and now grown perfect
> I shall pass my life's remainder."

Forty years later, Browning told with far greater realistic power and a grim humour suited to the theme, the "transmutation" of Ned Bratts. Karshish has his sudden revealing flash as he ponders the letter of Abib :—

> "The very God! Think, Abib, dost thou think,—
> So the All-great were the All-loving too"—

and the boy David his prophetic vision. A yet more splendid vision breaks from the seemingly ruined brain of the dying Paracelsus, and he has a gentler comrade in the dying courtier, who starts up from his darkened chamber crying that—

> "Spite of thick air and closed doors
> God told him it was June,—when harebells grow,
> And all that kings could ever give or take
> Would not be precious as those blooms to me."

But it is not only in these magical transitions and transformations that Browning's joy in soul was decisively coloured by his joy in power. A whole class of his characters — the most familiarly "Browningesque" division of them all — was shaped under the sway of this master-passion; the noble army of "strivers" who succeed and of "strivers" who fail, baffled artists and rejected lovers who mount to higher things on stepping-stones of their frustrated selves, like the heroes of *Old Painters in Florence*, and *The Last Ride Together*, and *The Lost Mistress;* and on the other hand, the artists and lovers who fail for want of this saving energy, like the Duke and Lady of the *Statue and the Bust*, like Andrea del Sarto and the Unknown Painter. But his very preoccupation with Art and with Love itself sprang mainly from his peculiar joy in the ardent putting-forth of soul. No kind of vivid consciousness was indifferent to him, but the luxurious receptivity of the spectator or of a passively beloved mistress touched him little compared with the faintest pulsation of the artist's "love of loving, rage of knowing, feeling, seeing the absolute truth of things," of the lover's passion for union with another soul. When he describes effects of music or painting, he passes instinctively over to the standpoint of the composer or the performer; shows us Hugues and Andrea themselves at the organ, or the easel; and instead of feeling the world turned into "an unsubstantial faery place" by the magic of the cuckoo or the thrush, strikes out playful theories of the professional methods of these songsters, — the cuckoo's monopoly of the "minor third," the thrush's wise way of repeating himself "lest you should think he never could recapture his first fine careless rapture." Suffering enters Browning's poetry almost never as the artless wail of the helpless stricken thing; the intolerable pathos of *Ye Banks and Braes*, or of

> "We twa hae paidl't in the burn
> Frae morning sun till dine,"

belonged to a side of primitive emotion to which "artificial" poets like Tennyson were far more sensitive than he. Suffering began to interest him when the wail passed into the fierceness of vindictive passion, as in

The Confessional, or into the outward calm of a self-subjugated spirit, as in *Any Wife to any Husband*, or *A Woman's Last Word;* or into reflective and speculative, if bitter, retrospect, as in *The Worst of It* or *James Lee's Wife.* And happiness, equally,—even the lover's happiness,—needed, to satisfy Browning, to have some leaven of challenging disquiet; the lover must have something to fear, or something to forgive, some hostility, or guilt, or absence, or death, to brave. Or the rapturous union of lovers must be remembered with a pang, when they have quarrelled; or its joy be sobered by recalling the perilous hairbreadth chances incurred in achieving it (*By the Fireside*)—

> "Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
> And the little less, and what worlds away!
> How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
> Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
> And life be a proof of this!"

Further, his joy in soul drew into the sphere of his poetry large tracts of existence which lay wholly or partly outside the domain of soul itself. The world of the lower animals hardly touched the deeper chords of his thought or emotion; but he watched their activities with a very genuine and constant delight, and he took more account of their pangs than he did of the soul-serving throes of man.[1] His imaginative selection among the countless types of these "low kinds" follows the lead of all those forms of primitive joy which we

[1] *Donald.*

have traced in his types of men and women: here it is the quick-glancing intricate flights of birds or insects, the flitting of quick sandpipers in and out of the marl, or of flies about an old wall; now the fierce contrasts of hue, angularity, and grotesque deformity all at once in Caliban's beasts:—

> "Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;
> Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
> That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown
> He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye
> By moonlight;"

or it is the massive power of the desert lion, in *The Glove*, or the bright æthereal purity of the butterfly fluttering over the swimmer's head, with its

> "membraned wings
> So wonderful, so wide,
> So sun-suffused;"[1]

or the cheery self-dependence of the solitary insect. "I always love those wild creatures God sets up for themselves," he wrote to Miss Barrett, "so independently, so successfully, with their strange happy minute inch of a candle, as it were, to light them."[2]

Finally, Browning's joy in soul flowed over also upon the host of lifeless things upon which "soul" itself has in any way been spent. To bear the mark of Man's art and toil, to have been hewn or moulded or built, compounded or taken to pieces, by human handiwork, was to acquire a certain romantic allurement for Browning's imagination hardly found in any other poet in the same degree. The "artificial products" of civilised and cultured life were for him not merely instruments of poetic expression but springs of poetic joy. No poetry can dispense with images from "artificial" things; Wordsworth himself does not always reject them; with most poets they are commoner, merely because they are better known; but for Browning the impress of "our meddling intellect" added exactly the charm and stimulus which complete exemption from it added for Wordsworth. His habitual imagery is fetched, not from flowers or clouds or moving winds and waters, but from wine-cups, swords and sheaths, lamps, tesselated pavements, chess-boards, pictures, houses, ships, shops. Most of these appealed also to other instincts,—to his joy in brilliant colour, abrupt line, intricate surface, or violent emotion. But their "artificiality" was an added attraction. The wedge, for instance, appeals to him not only by its angularity and its rending thrust, but as a weapon contrived by man's wit and driven home by his muscle. The cup appeals to him not only by its shape, and by the rush of the foaming wine, but as fashioned by the potter's wheel, and flashing at the festal board. His delight in complex technicalities, in the tangled issues of the law-courts, and the intertwining harmonies of Bach, sprang from his joy in the play of mind as well as from his joy in mere intricacy as such. His mountains are gashed and cleft and carved not only because their intricacy of craggy surface or the Titanic turmoil of mountain-shattering delights him, but also because he loves to suggest the deliberate axe or chisel of the warrior or the artist Man. He turns the quiet vicissitudes of nature into dexterous achievements of art. If he does not paint or dye the meads, he turns the sunset clouds into a feudal castle, shattered slowly with a visible mace; the morning sun pours into Pippa's chamber as from a wine-bowl; and Fifine's ear is

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[1] Some of these examples are from Mr Brooke's excellent chapter on Browning's Treatment of Nature.

[2] *To E.B.B.*, 5th Jan. 1846.

"cut
Thin as a dusk-leaved rose carved from a cocoanut."[1]

Sordello's slowly won lyric speech is called

"a rude
Armour . . . hammered out, in time to be
Approved beyond the Roman panoply
Melted to make it."[2]

And thirty years later he used the kindred but more recondite simile of a ring with its fortifying alloy, to symbolise the welded *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung* of his greatest poem.

Between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* there was, indeed, in Browning's mind, a closer affinity than that simile suggests. His imagination was a factor in his apprehension of truth; his "poetry" cannot be detached from his interpretation of life, nor his interpretation of life from his poetry. Not that all parts of his apparent teaching belong equally to his poetic mind. On the contrary, much of it was derived from traditions of which he never shook himself clear; much from the exercise of a speculative reason which, though incomparably agile, was neither well disciplined in its methods nor particularly original in its grasp of principles. But with the vitalising heart of his faith neither tradition nor reasoning had so much to do as that logic of the imagination by which great poets often implicitly enunciate what the after-thinker slowly works out. The characteristic ways of Browning's poetry, the fundamental joys on which it fed, of which the present chapter attempts an account, by no means define the range or the limits of his interpreting intellect, but they mark the course of its deepest currents, the permanent channels which its tides overflow, but to which in the last resort they return. In the following chapter we shall have to study these fluctuating movements of his explicit and formulated thought, and to distinguish, if we may, the groundtone of the deep waters from the more resonant roll of the shifting tides.

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[1] *Fifine at the Fair*, ii. 325.

[2] *Sordello*, i. 135.

CHAPTER X.

THE INTERPRETER OF LIFE.

> His voice sounds loudest and also clearest for the things that as a race we like best; . . . the fascination of faith, the acceptance of life, the respect for its mysteries, the endurance of its charges, the vitality of the will, the validity of character, the beauty of action, the seriousness, above all, of great human passion.
>
> —HENRY JAMES.

I.

THE trend of speculative thought in Europe during the century which preceded the emergence of Browning may be described as a progressive integration along several distinct lines of the great regions of existence which common beliefs, resting on a still vigorous medievalism, thrust apart. Nature was brought into nearer relation with Man, and Man with God, and God with Nature and with Man. In one aspect, not the least striking, it was a "return to Nature"; economists from Adam Smith to Malthus worked out the laws of man's dependence upon the material world; poets and idealists from Rousseau to Wordsworth discovered in a life "according to nature" the ideal for man; sociologists from Hume to Bentham, and from Burke to Coleridge, applied to human society conceptions derived from physics or from biology, and emphasised all that connects it with the mechanical aggregate of atoms, or with the organism.

In another aspect it was a return to God. If the scientific movement tended to subjugate man to a Nature in which, as Laplace said, there was no occasion for God, Wordsworth saw both in Nature and in man a spirit "deeply interfused"; and the great contemporary school of German philosophy set all ethical thinking in a new perspective by its original handling of the old thesis that duty is a realisation of the will of God.

But, in yet another aspect, it was a return to Man. If Man was brought nearer to Nature and to God, it was to a Nature and to a God which had themselves acquired, for him, closer affinities with humanity. He divined, with Wordsworth, his own joy, with Shelley his own love, in the breathing flower; he saw with Hegel in the Absolute Spirit a power vitally present in all man's secular activities and pursuits. And these interpreting voices of poets and philosophers were but the signs of less articulate sensibilities far more widely diffused, which were in effect bringing about a manifold expansion and enrichment of normal, mental, and emotional life. Scott made the romantic past, Byron and Goethe, in their different ways, the Hellenic past, a living element of the present; and Fichte, calling upon his countrymen to emancipate themselves, in the name not of the "rights of men" but of the genius of the German people, uttered the first poignant recognition of national life as a glorious vesture arraying the naked body of the individual member, not an aggregate of other units competing with or controlling him.

In this complicated movement Browning played a very notable and memorable part. But it was one of which the first generation of his readers was entirely, and he himself to a great extent, unconscious, and which his own language often disguises or conceals. Of all the poets of the century he had the clearest and most confident vision of the working of God in the world, the most buoyant faith in the divine origin and destiny of man. Half his poetry is an effort to express, in endless variety of iteration, the nearness of God, to unravel the tangled circumstance of human life, and disclose everywhere infinity enmeshed amid the intricacies of the finite.

On the side of Nature his interest was less keen and his vision less subtle. His "visitations of the living God" came to him by other avenues than those opened by Wordsworth's ecstatic gaze, "in love and holy passion," upon outward beauty. Only limited classes of natural phenomena appealed to him powerfully at all, the swift and sudden upheavals and catastrophes, the ardours and accesses, the silence that thrills with foreboding and suspense. For continuities, both of the mechanical and the organic kind, he lacked sense.

We have seen how his eye fastened everywhere upon the aspects of life least suggestive of either iron uniformity or harmonious evolution. The abrupt demarcations which he everywhere imposes or discovers were the symptom of a primitive ingrained atomism of thought which all the synthetic strivings of a God-intoxicated intellect could not entirely overcome.

II.

His metaphysical thinking thus became an effort to reconcile an all-embracing synthesis with a sense of individuality as stubborn and acute as ever man had. Body and Soul, Nature and Spirit, Man and God, Good and Evil, he presented now as co-operative or alien, now as hostile antagonists or antitheses. That their opposition is not ultimate, that evil is at bottom a form of good, and all finite existence a passing mode of absolute being, was a conviction towards which his thought on one side constantly strove, which it occasionally touched, but in which it could not securely rest. Possessed by the thirst for absoluteness, he vindicated the "infinity" of God and the soul by banishing all the "finiteness" of sense into a limbo of illusion. The infinite soul, imprisoned for life in a body which at every moment clogs its motion and dims its gaze, fights its way through the shows of sense,[1] "which ever proving false still promise to be true," until death opens the prison-gate and restores the captive to its infinity. Sorrow and evil were stains imposed by Time upon the white radiance of an eternal being; and Browning sometimes rose, though with a less sure step, to the dizzier height of holding Time itself to be unreal, and the soul's earthly life not an episode in an endless sequence, but a dream of progressive change imposed upon a changeless and timeless essence.

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[1] *Fifine at the Fair.*

But there were, as has been said, elements in Browning's mental make which kept this abstract and formal theory, fortified though it was by theological prepossessions, in check. His most intense consciousness, his most definite grip upon reality, was too closely bound up with the collisions and jostlings, the limits and angularities, of the world of the senses, for the belief in their illusoriness easily to hold its ground. This "infinite soul" palpably had its fullest and richest existence in the very heart of finite things. Wordsworth had turned for "intimations of immortality" to the remembered intuitions of childhood; Browning found them in every pang of baffled aspiration and frustrate will. Hence there arose in the very midst of this realm of illusion a new centre of reality; the phantoms took on solid and irrefragable existence, and refused to take to flight when the cock-crow announced that "Time was done, Eternity begun."

Body and Time had in general too strong a grip upon him to be resolved into illusion. His actual pictures of departed souls suggest a state very unlike that reversion of the infinite spirit which had been thrust upon Matter and distended in Time, to the timeless Infinitude it had forgone. It does not escape from Time, but only passes on from the limited section of Time known as life, into another section, without limit, known as Eternity. And if it escapes from Body, at least Browning represents his departed soul more boldly than any other modern poet in a garb of flesh. Evelyn Hope, when she wakens in another world, will find her unknown lover's leaf in her hand, and "remember, and understand."

And just as Matter and Time invade Browning's spiritual eternity, so his ideal of conduct for man while still struggling with finite conditions casts its shadow on to the state of immortal release. Two conceptions, in fact, of the life after death, corresponding to divergent aspects of his thought, contend in Browning's mind. Now it is a state of emancipation from earthly limits,—when the "broken arcs" become "perfect rounds" and "evil" is transformed into "so much good more," and "reward and repose" succeed the "struggles"[1] by which they have been won. But at times he startles the devout reader by foreshadowing not a sudden transformation but a continuation of the slow educative process of earth in a succession of preliminary heavens before the consummate state is reached. "Progress," in short, was too deeply ingrained in Browning's conception of what was ultimately good, and therefore ultimately real, not to find entrance into his heaven, were it only by some casual backdoor of involuntary intuition. Even in that more gracious state "achievement lacked a gracious somewhat"[1] to his indomitable fighting instinct.

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[1] *Saul*, xvii.

> "Soul resteth not, and mine must still advance,"

he had said in *Pauline*, and the soul that ceased to advance ceased for Browning, in his most habitual mood, to exist. The "infinity" of the soul was not so much a gift as a destiny, a power of hungering for ever after an ideal completeness which it was indefinitely to pursue and to approach, but not to reach. Far from having to await a remote emancipation to become completely itself, the soul's supremest life was in its hours of heroic stress, when it kept some dragon of unbelief quiet underfoot, like Michael,

> "Who stands calm, just because he feels it writhe."

It was at this point that the athletic energy of Browning's nature told most palpably upon the complexion of his thought. It did not affect its substance, but it altered the bearing of the parts, giving added weight to all its mundane and positive elements. It gave value to every challenging obstruction akin to that which allured him to every angular and broken surface, to all the "evil" which balks our easy perception of "good."[2]

[1] *One Wòrd Móre.*

[2] *Bishop Blougram*

Above all, by idealising effort, it created a new ethical end which every strenuous spirit could not merely strive after but fulfil, every day of its mortal life; and thus virtually transferred the focus of interest and importance from "the next world's reward and repose" to the vital "struggles in this."

Browning's characteristic conception of the nature and destiny of man was thus not a compact and consistent system, but a group of intuitions nourished from widely different regions of soul and sense, and undergoing, like the face of a great actor, striking changes of expression without material change of feature under the changing incidence of stress and glow. The ultimate gist of his teaching was presented through the medium of conceptions proper to another school of thought, which, like a cryptogram, convey one meaning but express another. He had to work with categories like finite and infinite, which the atomic habits of his mind thrust into exclusive opposition; whereas the profoundest thing that he had to say was that the "infinite" has to be achieved in and through the finite, that just the most definitely outlined action, the most individual purpose, the most sharply expressive thought, the most intense and personal passion, are the points or saliency in life which most surely catch the radiance of eternity they break. The white light was "blank" until shattered by refraction; and Browning is less Browning when he glories in its unbroken purity than when he rejoices in the prism, whose obstruction alone

> "shows aright
> The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
> Into the jewelled bow from blankest white."[1]

We have now to watch Browning's efforts to interpret this profound and intimate persuasion of his in terms of the various conceptions at his disposal.[2]

III.

Beside the soul, there was something else that "stood sure" for Browning—namely, God. Here, too, a theological dogma, steeped in his ardent mind, acquired a new potency for the imagination, and a more vital nexus with man and nature than any other poet of the century had given it. And here, too, the mystic and the positive strains of Browning's genius wrought together, impressing themselves equally in that wonderful Browningesque universe in which every germ seems to be itself a universe "needing but a look to burst into immense life," and infinity is ever at hand, behind a closed door. The whole of his theology was an attempt to express consistently two convictions, rarely found of the same intensity in the same brain, of the divineness of the universe and the individuality of man.

The mechanical Creator of Paley and the deists could never have satisfied him. From the first he "saw God everywhere." There was in him the stuff of which the "God-intoxicated" men are made, and he had moments, like that expressed in one of his most deliberate and emphatic personal utterances, in which all existence seemed to be the visible Face of God—

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[1] *Deaf and Dumb.*

[2] On the matter of this section cf. Mr A. C. Pigou's acute and lucid discussions, *Browning as a Religious Teacher*, ch. viii. and ix.

> "Become my universe that feels and knows."[1]

He clearly strained towards the sublime pantheistic imaginings of the great poets of the previous generation,—Wordsworth's "Something far more deeply interfused," Shelley's "One spirit's plastic stress," and Goethe's *Erdgeist*, who weaves the eternal vesture of God at the loom of Time. The dying vision of Paracelsus is as sublime as these, and marks Browning's nearest point of approach to the ways of thought they embody. In all the vitalities of the world, from the uncouth play of the volcano to the heaven-and-earth transfiguring mind of man, God was present, sharing their joy. But even here the psychological barrier is apparent, against which all the surge of pantheistic impulse in Browning broke in vain. This God of manifold joys was sharply detached from his universe; he was a sensitive and sympathetic spectator, not a pervading spirit. In every direction human personality opposed rigid frontiers which even the infinite God could not pass, and no poet less needed the stern warning which he addressed to German speculation against the "gigantic stumble"[2] of making them one. The mystic's dream of seeing all things in God, the Hegelian thesis of a divine mind realising itself in and through the human, found no lodgment in a consciousness of mosaic-like clearness dominated by the image of an incisively individual and indivisible self. In later life the sharp lines which he drew from the first about individual personality became a ring-fence within which each man "cultivated his plot,"[1] managing independently as he might the business of his soul. The divine love might wind inextricably about him,[2] the dance of plastic circumstance at the divine bidding impress its rhythms upon his life,[3] he retained his human identity inviolate, a "point of central rock" amid the welter of the waves.[4] His love might be a "spark from God's fire," but it was his own, to use as he would; he "stood on his own stock of love and power."[5]

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[1] *Epilogue.*

[2] *Christmas-Eve.*

IV.

In this sharp demarcation of man's being from God's, Browning never faltered. On the contrary, the individualising animus which there found expression impelled him to raise more formidable barriers about man, and to turn the ring-fence which secured him from intrusion into a high wall which cut off his view. In other words, the main current of Browning's thought sets strongly towards a sceptical criticism of human knowledge. At the outset he stands on the high *à priori* ground of Plato. Truth in its fulness abides in the soul, an "imprisoned splendour," which intellect quickened by love can elicit, which moments of peculiar insight, deep joy, and sorrow, and the coming on of death, can release. But the gross flesh hems it in, wall upon wall, "a baffling and perverting carnal mesh,"[1] the source of all error. The process of discovery he commonly conceived as an advance through a succession of Protean disguises of truth, each "one grade above its last presentment,"[2] until, at the rare moment, by the excepted eye, the naked truth was grasped. But Browning became steadily more reluctant to admit that these fortunate moments ever occurred, that the Proteus was ever caught. Things would be known to the soul as they were known to God only when it was emancipated by death. Infinity receded into an ever more inaccessible remoteness from the finite. For the speaker in *Christmas-Eve* man's mind was the image of God's, reflecting trace for trace his absolute knowledge; for Francis Furini the bare fact of his own existence is all he knows, a narrow rock-spit of knowledge enisled in a trackless ocean of ignorance. Thus for Browning, in differing moods and contexts, the mind of man becomes now a transparent pane, opening directly upon the truth as God sees it, now a coloured lens, pre-

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[1] *Ferishtah.*

[2] *Easter-Day.*

[3] *Rabbi ben Ezra.*

[4] *Epilogue.*

[5] *Christmas-Eve.*

[1] *Paracelsus.*

[2] *Fifine*, cxxiv.

senting truth in blurred refraction, now an opaque mirror idly bodying forth his futile and illusive dreams.

These conflicting views were rooted in different elements of Browning's many-sided nature. His vivid intuition of his own self-consciousness formed a standing type of seemingly absolute immediate knowledge, to which he stubbornly clung. When the optimism of the "Head" was discredited, passion-fraught instinct, under the name of the Heart, came to the rescue, and valiantly restored its authority. On the other hand, a variety of subtle attractions drew him on to give "illusion" a wider and wider scope. Sheer joy in battle had no small share. The immortal and infinite soul, projected among the shows of sense, could not be expected to do its part worthily if it saw through them: it had to believe its enemies real enemies, and its warfare a rational warfare; it had to accept time and place, and good and evil, as the things they seem. To have a perfectly clear vision of truth as it is in God was to be dazzled with excess of light, to grope and fumble about the world as it is for man, like the risen Lazarus—

> "witless of the size, the sum,
> The value in proportion of all things,
> Or whether it be little or be much."

The mystic who withdrew from the struggle with phantoms to gaze upon eternal realities was himself the victim of the worst illusions; while the hero who plunged into that struggle was training his soul, and thereby getting a grip upon ultimate truth. Thus Browning's passionate and reiterated insistence upon the illusiveness of knowledge was rooted in his inalienable faith in the worth and reality of moral conflict. The infinite soul realised itself most completely when it divested itself of the trappings of its infinity, and it worked out God's law most implicitly when it ignored God's point of view.

V.

Such a result could not be finally satisfying, and Browning's thought fastened with increasing predilection and exclusiveness upon one intense kind of vitality in which the hard antagonism of good and evil seems to be transcended, and that complete immersion of the soul in a nature not its own appears not as self-abnegation but as self-fulfilment. He did not himself use this phraseology about Love; it is that of a school to which he, at no time, it would seem, made any conscious approach. But it is clear that he found in the mysterious union and transfusion of diverse being which takes place in Love, as Hegel found in the union of opposites, the clue to the nature of reality, the very core of the heart of life. He did not talk of the union of opposites, but of "infinitude wreaking itself upon the finite." God himself would have been less divine, and so, as God, less real, had he remained aloof in lonely infinity instead of uniting himself with all creation in that love which "moves the world and the other stars"; the "loving worm," to quote his pregnant saying once more, were diviner than a loveless God. We saw how his theology is double-faced between the pantheistic yearning to find God everywhere and the individualist's resolute maintenance of the autonomy of man. God's Love, poured through the world, inextricably blended with all its power and beauty, thrilled with answering rapture by all its joy, and striving to clasp every human soul, provided the nearest approach to a solution of that conflict which Browning's mechanical metaphysics permitted. One comprehends, then, the profound significance for him of the actual solution apparently presented by Christian theology. In one supreme, crucial example the union of God with man in consummate love had actually, according to Christian belief, taken place, and Browning probably uttered his own faith when he made St John declare that

> "The acknowledgment of God in Christ
> Acknowledged by thy reason solves for thee
> All questions in the earth and out of it."[1]

For to acknowledge this was to recognise that love was divine, and that mankind at large, in virtue of their gift of love, shared in God's nature, finite as they were; that whatever clouds of intellectual illusion they walked in, they were lifted to a hold upon reality as unassailable as God's own by the least glimmer of love. Whatever else is obscure or elusive in Browning, he never falters in proclaiming the absolute and flawless worth of love. The lover cannot, like the scientific investigator, miss his mark, he cannot be baffled or misled; the object of his love may be unworthy, or unresponsive, but in the mere act of loving he has his reward.

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[1] *Death in the Desert.* These lines, however "dramatic," mark with precision the extent, and the limits, of Browning's Christian faith. The evidence of his writings altogether confirms Mrs Orr's express statement that Christ was for him, from first to last, "a manifestation of divine love," by human form accessible to human love; but not the Redeemer of the orthodox creed.

> "Knowledge means
> Ever renewed assurance by defeat
> That victory is somehow still to reach;
> But love is victory, the prize itself."[1]

This aspect of Browning's doctrine of love, though it inspired some of his most exalted lyrics, throws into naked relief the dearth of social consciousness in Browning's psychology. Yet it is easy to see that the absolute self-sufficiency into which he lifted the bare fact of love was one of the mainsprings of his indomitable optimism. In Love was concentrated all that emancipates man from the stubborn continuities of Nature. It started up in corrupt or sordid hearts, and swept all their blind velleities into its purifying flame of passion—

> "Love is incompatible
> With falsehood,—purifies, assimilates
> All other passions to itself."[2]

And the glimmer of soul that lurked in the veriest act

[1] *Pillar of Sebzevir.*

[2] *Colombe's Birthday.*

of humanity the breath of love could quicken into pervading fire.[1] Love was only the most intense and potent of those sudden accesses of vitality which are wont, in Browning, suddenly to break like a flame from the straw and dross of a brutish or sophisticated consciousness, confounding foresight and calculation, but giving endless stimulus to hope. Even in the contact with sin and sorrow Browning saw simply the touch of Earth from which Love, like Antæus, sprang into fuller being; they were the "dread machinery" devised to evolve man's moral qualities, "to make him love in turn and be beloved."[2]

But with all its insurgent emancipating vehemence Love was for Browning, also, the very ground of stable and harmonious existence, "the energy of integration," as Myers has finely said, "which makes a cosmos of the sum of things," the element of permanence, of law. True, its harmony was of the kind which admits discord and eschews routine; its law that which is of eternity and not of yesterday; its stability that which is only assured and fortified by the chivalry that plucks a Pompilia, or an Alcestis, from their legal doom. The true anarchist, as he sometimes dared to hint, was the cold unreason of duty which, as in *Bifurcation*, keeps lovers meant for each other apart. It is by love that the soul solves the problem—so tragically insoluble to poor Sordello—of "fitting to the finite its infinity," and satisfying the needs of Time and Eternity at once;[3] for Love, belonging equally to both spheres, can bring the purposes of body and soul into complete accord:

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[1] *Fifine.*

[2] *The Pope.*

[3] *Sordello, sub fin.*

> "Like yonder breadth of watery heaven, a bay
> And that sky-space of water, ray for ray
> And star for star, one richness where they mixed,
> As this and that wing of an angel, fixed
> Tumultuary splendours."

In a life thus thrilled into harmony heaven was already realised on earth; and Eternity itself could but continue what Time had begun. Death, for such a soul, was not an awaking, for it had not slept; nor an emancipation, for it was already free; nor a satisfying of desire, for the essence of Love was to want; it was only a point at which the "last ride together" might pass into an eternal "riding on"—

> "With life for ever old, yet new,
> Changed not in kind but in degree,
> The instant made Eternity,—
> And Heaven just prove that I and she
> Ride, ride together, for ever ride!"

VI.

No intellectual formula, no phrase, no word, can express the whole purport of those intense and intimate fusions of sensation, passion, and thought which we call poetic intuition, and which all strictly poetic "philosophy" or "criticism of life" is an attempt to interpret and articulate. Browning was master of more potent weapons of the strictly intellectual kind than many poets of his rank, and his work is charged with convictions which bear upon philosophic problems and involve philosophic ideas. But they were neither systematic deductions from a speculative first principle nor fragments of tradition eclectically pieced together; by their very ambiguity and Protean many-sidedness they betrayed that, however tinged they might be on the surface with speculative or traditional phrases, the nourishing roots sprang from the heart of joyous vitality in a primitive and original temperament. In Browning, if in any man, Joy sang that "strong music of the soul" which re-creates all the vitalities of the world, and endows us with "a new Earth and a new Heaven." And if joy was the root of Browning's intuition, and life "in widest commonalty spread" the element in which it moved, Love, the most intimate, intense, and marvellous of all vital energies, was the ideal centre towards which it converged. In Love, as Browning understood it, all those elementary joys of his found satisfaction. There he saw the flawless purity which rejoiced him in Pompilia's soul, which "would not take pollution, ermine-like armed from dishonour by its own soft snow." There he saw sudden incalculableness of power abruptly shattering the continuities of routine, throwing life instantly into a new perspective, and making barren trunks break into sudden luxuriance like the palm; or, again, intimately interpenetrating soul with soul,—"one near one is too far"; or entangling the whole creation in the inextricable embrace of God.

But if all his instincts and imaginative proclivities found their ideal in Love, they also insensibly impressed their own character upon his conception of it. The "Love" which has so deep a significance for Browning is a Love steeped in the original complexion of his mind, and bearing the impress of the singular position which he occupies in the welter of nineteenth-century intellectual history. His was one of the rare natures in which revolutionary liberalism and spiritual reaction, encountering in nearly equal strength, seem to have divided their principles and united their forces. Psychologically, the one had its strongest root in the temper which reasons, and values ideas; the other in that which feels, and values emotions. Sociologically, the one stood for individualism, the other for solidarity. In their ultimate presuppositions, the one inclined to the standpoint of the senses and experience; the other to a mostly vague and implicit idealism. In their political ideals, the one strove for progress, and for freedom as its condition; the other for order, and for active legal intervention as its safeguard.

In two of these four points of contrast, Browning's temperament ranged him more or less decisively on the Liberal side. Individualist to the core, he was conspicuously deficient in the kind of social mind which makes a poet the voice of an organised community, a nation, or a class. Progress, again, was with him even more an instinct than a principle; and he became the *vates sacer* of unsatisfied aspiration. On the other hand, that he was not without elements of the temper which makes for order was shown by his punctilious, almost eager, observance of social conventions, and, in the last years of his life, by the horror excited in him by what he took to be the anarchy of Women's Suffrage and Home Rule. In the other two fields of opposition he belonged decisively to the spiritual and emotional reaction. Spirit was for him the ultimate fact of existence, the soul and God were the indissoluble realities. But his idealism was not potent and pure enough either to control the realist suggestions of his strong senses and energetic temperament, or to interpret them in its own terms. And in the conflict between reason and feeling, or, as he put it, between "head" and "heart," as sources of insight, and factors in human advancement, feeling found its most brilliant champion in Browning, and its most impressive statement in his doctrine of Love. An utilitarian reduction of welldoing to a distribution of properly calculated doses of satisfaction he dismissed with a scorn as derisive as Carlyle's; "general utility" was a favourite of "that old stager the devil."[1] Yet no critic of intellect ever used intellect more vigorously, and no preacher of the rights of the heart ever dealt less in flaccid sentiment. Browning was Paracelsus as well as Aprile, and sharply as he chose to dissever "Knowledge" and "Love," Love was for him never a foe of intellect, but a more gifted comrade who does the same work more effectively, who dives deeper, soars higher, welds more potently into more enduring unities, and flings upon dry hearts with a more infallible magic the seed of more marvellous new births. Browning as the poet of Love is thus the last, and assuredly not the least, in the line which handed on the torch of Plato. The author of the *Phædrus* saw in the ecstasy of Love one of the avenues to the knowledge of the things that indeed are. To Dante the supreme realities were mirrored in the eyes of Beatrice. For Shelley Love was interwoven through all the mazes of Being; it was the source of the strength by which man masters his gods. To all these masters of idealism Browning's vision of Love owed something of its intensity and of its range. With the ethical Love of Jesus and St Paul his affinities were more apparent, but less profound. For him, too, love was the sum of all morality and the root of all goodness. But it resembled more the joyous self-expansion of the Greek than the humility and self-abnegation of Christian love. Not the saintly ascetic nor the doer of good works, but the artist and the "lover," dominated his imagination when he wrote of Love; imbuing even God's love for the world with the joy of creation and the rapture of embrace. Aprile's infinite love for things impelled him to body them visibly forth. Deeper in Browning than his Christianity, and prior to it, lay his sense of immeasurable worth in all life, the poet's passion for being.

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[1] *Red-cotton Night-cap Country.*

Browning's poetry is thus one of the most potent of the influences which in the nineteenth century helped to break down the shallow and mischievous distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular," and to set in its place the profounder division between man enslaved by apathy, routine, and mechanical morality, and man lifted by the law of love into a service which is perfect freedom, into an approximation to God which is only the fullest realisation of humanity.

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